



A Push of the Pendulum

Alfred Reeves Wissen

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by

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Preface

I'm a life-long student of philosophy and theology, and also a life-long reader of fantasy. Completing a Ph.D. in theology at the University of Chicago and being at home in the pages of Tolkien, Pratchett, LeGuin, or Bellairs (among many others) never seemed a contradiction to me. At some point I realized that what philosophy and theology pursue—among other things, a quest to find meaning and order amidst the apparent chaos of our universe—was akin to the pursuits of good fantasy. Both share a dissatisfaction with the world as it is and an imagining—a *phantasy*—of what might be better. Of course many label fantasy as escapism, which surely it is. But I would argue that at its best it is something more than that. In the hands of Ursula LeGuin or the later Terry Pratchett, there is an earnest attempt to show a vision of a better world, or of better humans. Of what we could be, and perhaps sometimes are.

I freely admit that my tastes run to pre-dystopian fantasy. Much YA and adult fantasy today grapples with the peril our world faces, and understandably so. Perhaps it is just escapism, a desire not to think about it all for a bit, but I think my distaste for dystopia also includes a hope for something redemptive. At any rate, this novella is in many ways very traditional. It owes much to John Bellairs and I am sure others, though not, I want to point out, to J.K. Rowling. For even though it is set in a school and features magic, this is no Harry Potter, neither in scope, accomplishment, or design. It is set in a school because that is what I know best, and it involves magic because, well, it *is* fantasy.

What this does offer that is original is my attempt to write a fantasy novel that has a philosophically consistent understanding of magic. One of my pet peeves with much fantasy, even some of the greats, is that magic is just there, with no explanation of how or why it works. “It’s magic,” you might say. This makes me think of a passage from one of Terry Pratchett’s last novels (*Snuff*), in which Sam Vimes complains, “. . . that’s why I don’t like magic, captain. ‘Cos it’s *magic*. You can’t ask questions, it’s magic. You don’t know where it

comes from, it's magic! That's what I don't like about magic, it does everything by magic!"

As much as Sam Vimes is a favorite character of mine, I beg to differ; there can be magic in a fantasy novel that accomplishes what I take to be part of the point of good fantasy: to give us a vision of how our interconnected universe works—or ought to work! I don't think "magic" precludes a sense of why and how. Indeed, magic in a fantasy novel can function as a metaphor, exposing the potential transcendence of time and space that is implicit in a universe in which everything that exists is a part of a higher unity, and so connected to everything else. I have tried in this novel to draw on my academic training and my experience of fantasy as a genre to create something that brings these two together and provides that why and how and entertains a vision of meaning and purpose. I hope I have succeeded.

Cast of Characters

Julian Drake: a 15 year-old sophomore at St. Eligius School, from suburban Washington, new to the school, and discontent

Ryan Williams : boarding student from New Jersey, Julian's first friend at St. E; a junior and prefect, and gifted member of the crew

Hieu Nguyen: Vietnamese boarding student, senior, a tech wiz

Tess Darlay: Scottish boarding student, sophomore, a coxswain and newspaper staffer

Ms. Sayer: the school chaplain, fortunately learned in Latin

Dr. Ernest Drake: Julian's deceased great-grandfather, former history master

Dr. Stephens: Headmaster

Ms. Yates: crew coach

Ms. Paulette: English master

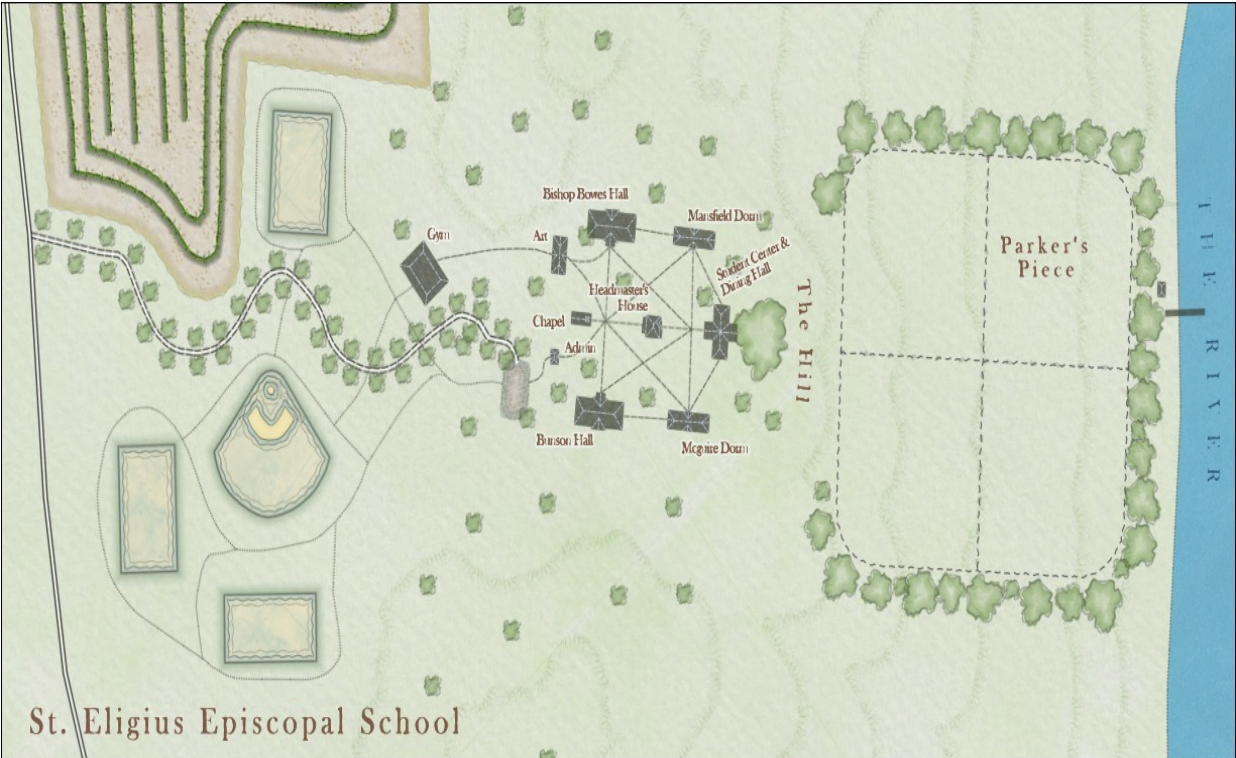
Mr. Baker: history master

Mrs. Bibfeldt: librarian

Mrs. Ackermann: newspaper sponsor, science master

Mr. Stryker: new board of governors member

Campus Map



Dates

School Year 2010-2011: the year of our story

1921: the founding of St. Eligius Episcopal School

1921-1925: Dr. Ernest Drake's tenure at St. Eligius

Chapter One: Home By Train

With a lurch the train began to move. Uncertainly at first, but then with more decision, it glided from the Richmond station. Julian Drake looked out the window beside him, apathetically watching the people on the concrete platform, who were framed by his reflection. They all seemed full of purpose. Some ran to catch a train, some greeted friends or family, some were lost in tablets or phones, and some headed for the snack bar by the entrance.

They all know where they're going, he thought. Unlike me. In his reflection, Julian saw a pale face, brown shaggy hair, brown eyes. Nothing that gave any indication that he knew where he was going.

To be fair, that was not strictly true. He did know where he was going, at least physically. He was riding this Amtrak train, returning home from boarding school for his fall break. It was early October, and he was coming from the Virginia countryside, where his new school, St. Eligius, perched on the banks of a river. He was going to the suburbs of Washington D.C, going home to the house where he had grown up with his parents.

Except that home wasn't the same anymore. Not since his parents' divorce a year ago. His dad still lived in his childhood home, and he would be spending his four-day break there, though he lived with his mother at times as well.

He thought that he should be looking forward to getting home, but he was not sure that he was. Julian knew that he *was* happy to get away from St. Eligius. This was his first term at the school, and he hated it. Up until this August he had been in public school, in large classes with no dress codes, no morning prayer services, and enough students that he could disappear in the crowd. He knew he had been doing a lot of that in the last year. His mom and dad had told him that they were splitting up during the summer before his ninth grade year. Before that he had been a pretty good student in school, but when he began high school he just didn't seem to care. The work wasn't particularly difficult; he knew that success was something he could easily grasp. But he couldn't find the motivation within himself to want that success anymore. It was not *his* success, it was success for someone else, on someone else's terms. His parents had always expected him to do well, but

after what they had done to the family, Julian didn't see that they had any real authority over him. They had made such a mess of their own lives, of *his* life, how could they expect to guide him any longer?

So his ninth grade year saw his grades slip. He just wanted to be left alone, to vanish. He spent his time playing video games and reading fantasy novels, and doing little else. It was simple enough to get by on the tests, but he never did his homework, and it took its toll. By late spring, his grades were low. Not failing, but so far below what he used to earn that his parents stopped fighting long enough to panic over him. Their eventual response blind-sided him. Julian was smart enough to know that they were unhappy about his grades and his apathy, but he expected threats, groundings, curtailings of allowance. Instead, his parents picked him up from school one afternoon in April, and told him that they were going to visit another school.

The visit turned out to be an overnight trip into the countryside of Virginia, to visit a rural Episcopal boarding school where Julian's great-grandfather had once taught. In spite of his apathy, he had to admit that the place was beautiful. A cluster of red brick colonial buildings on a hilltop overlooking a river, it was breathtaking, especially on that beautiful April day. But that was the only redeeming thing he could see about the place. It was so small; only 250 students, the dorm rooms were old and a little shabby, and worst of all, there was nothing to do out there in the middle of nowhere! He couldn't imagine what his parents were thinking. The director of admission, a smiling, attractive Asian-American woman who had lived on the campus for twenty-one years, said that the school's mission was to prepare kids who were having difficulty succeeding in large high schools for college.

"We're not for kids who can't or won't work," she said. "Our students all go on to college. But our job is to help our students find themselves. We give them a sense of place, a fit, so they can develop who they are and become successful."

Julian remembered his reply: "The only place I want to be is home." She said she understood his feelings, but hoped he would join the student body in August. In the end, his parents had not given him a choice. They enrolled him and he had traveled back to the campus in late August with his father. His mom met them there, and once he was settled into his room they had left.

As the train picked up speed and the urban grayness gave way to suburban sprawl, Julian thought about arriving home. His father had told him recently that he was planning to remarry. Julian wondered to himself if that was part of the decision to send him away to school: could raising him just be too much trouble with all the turmoil in their own lives? He certainly knew kids who were at boarding school because a stepparent didn't want them in the house. Grinning ruefully, Julian thought of Cinderella, but then shook his head. His parents weren't wicked, nor was his father's girlfriend. It was more the idea that bothered Julian. The simple thought of living with a stepmother made Julian angry, but he didn't want to be at his mom's place all the time either. How long would it be before *she* married someone new? What he wanted was for things to be the way they used to be: comfortable, comforting. His dad's recent announcement seemed to confirm that the old days really were gone. He was going home to his old house, but everything would be different. Julian wondered if it would be home anymore.

Still staring out the train window, he looked at the seemingly endless outback of houses, roads, fast food joints, gas stations, shopping malls. It all seemed so barren and the same. He might as well get off the train here; it was no different from the suburbs of D.C. where he was going. There wasn't, he thought, *any* place for him.

A small billboard near a mall caught his eye, and he blinked, disbelieving.

"Has the system failed you? Consider St. Eligius Episcopal School. Small classes, caring faculty, beautiful setting: a place for you."

All of his cynicism rushed into his mind, and he scoffed out loud: "tch."

Certainly the school was a place like no other. The buildings were pretty, like a small colonial college campus, and the view of the river was sensational. There *was* a peacefulness about the place. The teachers were much more demanding than the ones in his public school. But really the difference from his old school was the relationships the teachers had with the students. They really tried to get to know their students. Even the headmaster, Dr. Stephens, knew everyone's name and would stop and talk with Julian when he saw him. That was all great, but Julian didn't want to be known; he wanted to be left alone. The people at the school all seemed to belong there, and he didn't. The teachers and students all seemed to know the routine and fit into it. Amazingly, most of the students didn't seem to

mind it. The required breakfast in the morning, the two-times-a-week morning prayer services, which Julian found really boring. The assemblies in which the achievements of students were recognized in front of everybody. The classes, the required athletics after school, the institutional food. The required study halls if your grades slipped. In spite of himself, Julian found himself getting at least some work done, out of boredom. But while a lot of the kids seemed to like it, he didn't want any part of all of this. The problem was, he didn't seem to have a choice but to be there.

Part of him wished he could like it, but most of him just wanted to be home. Where that home used to be was approaching faster than he was ready for: the train was already entering the outskirts of the Washington, D.C. area. He tried to shut all these thoughts out of his mind. Pulling out his phone, he tried to drown it all out with music.

When the train pulled into Union Station, Julian pulled his bag down from the overhead rack and walked out into the huge, ornate marble lobby to meet his father. He wasn't ready for another change in his life, but if he had learned anything in the last year, it was that he couldn't run from it. Sighing, he shouldered his bag and walked out to face another place he couldn't call home.

Chapter Two: The Clock

Getting into the car—a late model Lexus with every possible gadget, button, and light—with his Dad, Julian felt the awkwardness. When they had greeted one another in the station, there had been the usual hug, somewhat reserved and grudging on Julian's part, somewhat overenthusiastic on his Dad's part. Julian had wondered about this for a moment, but didn't make much of it. Now that they were driving away from the station and crawling through the jammed streets of Washington, the atmosphere in the car seemed oppressive. It was as if there were something hovering, some doom that threatened them, undeclared. The feeling matched the late afternoon weather: oppressively cloudy and gray, and warm for October.

They chatted listlessly about small things: his teachers, his classes, his sport (rowing), whether he had been studying. To his father's questions, Julian gave typical responses: "They're OK . . . Nothing . . . I don't know." Gradually the conversation faded away to nothing. Julian was aching inside to ask about the impending marriage. When would it be? What would it mean for him? But he could not bring himself to speak. If Dad wasn't going to tell him, he wasn't going to ask. Silence consumed the last half of the drive. They clawed their way in fits and starts through the traffic lights, out into the suburbs of Maryland. Approaching their neighborhood, Julian was surprised to feel his heartbeat quickening. He was both anxious to get home and anxious about what he would find. As they turned down the street the house was on, the feeling of nervous tension increased. Instead of pulling into the driveway, Julian's father allowed the car to drift to a halt at the curb in front of the house. Trees growing along the edge of the front lawn obscured the house itself. Planted when Julian was a baby, when the family had first moved into the subdivision, the trees had grown with him, 'til now they provided a screen that effectively blocked the house from the neighboring ones and from the street.

"Why are you stopping here?" Julian asked.

"Julian, there is something I have to tell you."

Julian didn't respond. The anxiety he had been feeling became stronger. His stomach was clenched, tied up tightly, and he felt that if he said a word he would explode.

"Julian . . ." His Dad paused, obviously uncertain of how to say whatever it was.

Julian just waited.

"Julian, I have sold the house. Rachel and I are moving to a new house next week. We will be getting married when you come home for Winter Break.

Julian, I know this will be upsetting for you, but you have to understand the practicalities of the situation. . . . "

But Julian wasn't interested in, wasn't even hearing, the practicalities. He opened the car door, heaved himself out, slammed the door, and ran through the trees up to the house. Stacks of unassembled moving boxes sat here and there on the walk and front porch, along with a few packed boxes. Ignoring these, ignoring the calls of his father, who by now had pulled the car into the drive, Julian let himself in the unlocked front door. A strange man crouched in the den, across the foyer, packing books into boxes. Julian turned right to enter the kitchen, to find an equally strange woman wrapping glasses in butcher paper and packing them into a box.

"Who are you?" Julian asked.

"We're from the moving company, honey. Are you just getting home from school?"

"Yes. No. Well, I mean, I live here."

Julian wanted to shout, "Get out of my house!" but his voice failed him. Instead of speaking further, he ran from the kitchen, across the foyer and up the stairs to his room.

He found his room mostly packed. This wasn't a complete surprise, as many of his possessions, his laptop, his clothes, and some of his books, were in his dorm room at school. But the rest was already in boxes. This affected him more than he realized was possible. It's the books, he thought. They had been on the crude bookshelf that he had cobbled together from cinder blocks and boards, for years, since he really began to read in third or fourth grade. They had been his constant companions, fellow occupants of the room. Now they were packed up in boxes. He felt that it was no longer his room, his place.

Julian threw himself on the bed, one of the few things not packed. Lying there face down, he heard his dad climbing the stairs, heard him pause in the doorway.

"Julian . . ."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to upset you. I didn't want to distract you from your school work . . . I guess I just didn't want to fight over it."

Julian realized suddenly that like school, it just didn't seem worth fighting over. The decision was made; it was done. He didn't live here anymore. He just wanted to retreat inside himself, to be unnoticed, left alone. He forced himself to ask the obvious question.

"Where are you moving?"

"To northern Virginia. We'll be closer to you there than here in Maryland, and you'll have a big room in the house. I'll take you over to see it tonight."

"Fine."

Clearly his dad didn't know what to make of Julian's listlessness, but he seemed relieved that the fight he had dreaded had not occurred.

"OK, then. I'll leave you to pack up anything you want to take back to school. We will be having dinner with Rachel at 7."

The awkwardness continued at dinner that evening. Julian had met his dad's girlfriend, Rachel, several times before, but he had never thought of her as a potential stepmother. The very idea of any stepmother was too weird for him to grasp. She was nice enough, but no substitute for what he considered to be his family, the family that would not return. After dinner they drove across the American Legion Bridge into the newer suburbs of northern Virginia. Getting off the beltway, Dad drove his Lexus into a new neighborhood of enormous houses, all of brick and stone, each sitting close to the next on tiny treeless lots. To Julian, the effect was bizarre. Jammed together, they looked like imitations of real houses. It reminded him of the toys he had gotten at fast food places as a small child; imitations of the real toys you wanted, they were not the real thing, and they never lasted long, always breaking and disappointing. Julian hoped that would not be what this house held in store.

After seeing the house, Julian realized that his Dad was right about one thing. His new room *was* large, and it had a dormer window seat where you could read or play a computer game. He thought that his dad would probably ask him to set up wireless access for the house. He thought vaguely

that he should feel happy about moving here. But he also felt that he didn't care.

Back at the old house, Julian spent the rest of the long weekend reading and playing games on his tablet. After a few tries, his dad gave up asking him if he wanted to see his old friends. Julian just had no interest. He and his friends from middle school were in such different places, particularly now that Julian had gone away to school. He felt strange being the only one sent away to school, and he didn't want to have to answer questions about it.

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On Monday morning, a few hours before he was due to catch the train back to St. Eligius, Julian went into the den to flop with his tablet on the couch. The den used to be his favorite room in the house, a comfortable, dark room with the old couch, bookshelves, books, a fireplace, and an antique desk. Julian had loved to just be in the room, browsing through books, or, more recently, using it as a place to relax and surf the web. Entering the room, he noticed something odd. The old mantel clock, the one that had sat on a bookshelf in the den since Julian could remember, was out on the desk. Beside it sat a few other odds and ends: a few books, some packs of playing cards, old board games, some photos in metal frames. Roughly two feet high, it was an old fashioned clock, made of dark wood with Roman numerals on a gold face to mark the hours, long ornate hands, a pendulum and a key. You had to put the key into a hole in the face of the clock and turn a shaft to wind up the clock once a week. Once the clock was wound, you gently pushed the pendulum to set it going, and then it would rock back and forth on its own. The clock had no power cord or switch. In a way, it was a very strange thing to be in the house at all. Julian's dad tended to like modern things, and except for this room, there was a lot of chrome and glass in the house. The clock didn't really fit in. But it had come from Julian's great-grandfather on his father's side, as had the desk, and his dad probably just kept it around out of guilt.

Looking at the clock now, Julian remembered his distant childhood impression of this clock. Then the clock had seemed almost magical, the way it ran by itself. He used to sit, mesmerized by its simple motion, waiting to see if he could actually see the hands move. For some reason he found

himself wanting to see that motion again, wanting to be mesmerized by the simple, regular and reliable swing of the pendulum. He set his tablet down and walked over to the table where the clock sat. The clock was covered in dust, looking like it had not been touched in ages, except for the smudge marks showing where it had been picked up from the shelf. Without knowing why, Julian hesitated to touch it, but thinking himself silly, he undid the stiff clasp on the left edge and swung the glass door open. Was it still there? Yes, sitting in the dust at the bottom of the clock cabinet was a silver-gray, T-shaped metal key. It was shaped oddly, with two-inch long, ornately carved handles and a short, hollow barrel. Julian picked up the key and fitted it into the one of the two holes in the clock face. He remembered now his dad explaining to him how the clock worked, that one of the shafts was for winding the hour and minute hands, and one was for winding the chimes. He turned the key slowly. The hidden spring in the clock, long undisturbed, offered a lot of resistance to the key. Julian turned the key around five or six times, until he felt the resistance reach the point that to turn it farther would be to risk breaking something. He withdrew the key, slowly placing it back in the bottom of the cabinet, and reached for the pendulum. The pendulum was an oblong cylinder, about four inches tall, made of long-tarnished brass. It hung from a wooden arm that reached up into the mechanical innards of the clock, hidden behind the face. With a breath, Julian gave the pendulum a gentle push, and let it go.

Just as he remembered, the pendulum continued moving on its own, and the clock began its steady, measured ticking, marking off the seconds of each minute. It was very odd, but listening to the ticking and watching the predictable swing of the pendulum, Julian felt transported out of the room, out of the house, out of this whole world and its cares. He felt confronted neither by the official time his phone gave him, nor by any nagging force that compelled him to get up on time lest he get in trouble with his parents or with the St. Eligius faculty, but rather by a strange sense of stillness. It wasn't time he felt, or any attempt to use time to control events. What he felt was not something under his control, not something that would help him organize his world or get things done. Instead, he felt something immensely comforting. He felt all the anxiety that had been eating at him melt away. Somehow in the motion of the clock his troubles seemed to dissolve. All that

existed was that steady, reliable motion. It made him feel at home, and that nothing would change, at least not for the worse.

It was such a strange feeling that Julian turned away from the clock, looking around the room for he did not know what. For a few moments he watched the dust floating in the shafts of sunlight coming in through the two windows, and then he shook his head. Though he could still hear the clock ticking, the feeling was passing. But it had been there; he couldn't deny the intensity of the experience.

Just then his Dad came in, and noticed that the clock was ticking. He smiled, and said,

"That old thing still working? If I had known, I would have tried to auction it on e-Bay."

"E-Bay?" Julian gasped, strangely affected by the experience he had just had. "Why do you want to sell it? We've had it for ages."

"Exactly. I'm trying to clear out stuff we don't need. That thing just gathers dust, and I never have wound it. It's in the pile to take to Goodwill. I don't really have time to start an auction now."

Julian thought of a time when his dad did wind the clock. "You used to wind it. I used to like to watch it when I was little."

"That was a long time ago, Julian. Like I said, I want to clear some of the old junk out."

"Dad, it's not junk!"

"OK, Julian, it's not junk. But I still want to get rid of it."

What he said next surprised him as much as it did Dad. But it just came from inside himself.

"I want the clock. I want to take it back to school with me." For the first time in months, Julian didn't feel listless or apathetic. This was something he really wanted, something he cared about. He braced himself to fight until he got his way on this.

"Julian, that would be a very odd thing to bring back to school. Kids will make fun of you."

Julian found himself not caring about any reasons his father could present. He wanted desperately to save the clock from being thrown out.

"Dad, as long as it's gone, what do you care where it goes? I want to take it with me."

"Julian, this is weird . . . but I guess you're right. I really don't care. Take the clock. I just don't want you to get hassled."

"Don't worry. It'll be fine."

"All right, son. Take it, then. Now, don't we need to get ready to take you to the train station?"

It had been too easy. Given what he had just felt, Julian thought his father should have argued more, should have cared more. But then he realized the accuracy of their words: his dad really didn't care about the clock, as long as it was gone.

Chapter Three: St. Eligius

The clock made the train journey on the empty seat beside Julian, and apart from his continuing worry that the frequent jostlings of the train would damage the old clock, the ride was uneventful. He had unhooked the pendulum from the works, and wrapped the clock and pendulum in bubble wrap, placing them in one of the moving boxes he found lying around the house.

As the train pulled into the Richmond station, Julian realized that, as delayed as the train was by its frequent stops to make way for freight trains, he might miss his ride back to campus. The Student Life Office arranged for vans to meet the various trains and airplanes returning students from breaks. From the station it would be a good hour's drive out into the country to St. Eligius. The next train into Richmond that was likely to contain students wasn't due for two hours, and Julian didn't like the idea of sitting in the station with his precious parcel for that long.

Jostled by the flow of people exiting the train, Julian struggled with his bag and the box. Once out of the train, he paused to get his bearings in the station, and then he walked hurriedly to the doors leading to the street. As he came out of the station into the breeze of the October day, he saw the taillights of a St. Eligius van just turning the corner at the end of the block, leaving the station to return to campus. The van should have waited for him. They should have had his name as being on this train. But then he remembered that his original travel plans that he had turned into the student life office had him returning later in the day. This morning he and his dad had decided on taking the earlier train, and now here he was, stuck.

Julian stood for a while, watching the spot where the van had vanished, and then he slowly turned around, resigned to finding a place to sit and wait for the next van. Even if he called the school, they would not send a van just for him. He reentered the station, and sat down, fretting over the delay. He didn't understand why, exactly, but he felt a desperate urge to get the clock to school. He felt every second of delay as something intolerable. Maybe it was because the break had been so unsatisfactory. He *had* gotten away from school, but the time spent at home had not been fun. Thinking about it brought a return of his anxieties over his family: the divorce, his father's remarriage, the move. Or it brought a sense of boredom. If all he was going

to do was read and surf the internet, well, he could do that at school. The one bright spot was the clock. But thinking about that only brought him back to his desire to return to school. He laughed to himself at that thought. He had been so desperate to get away, and now he was desperate to return. Would he ever be happy anywhere?

After twenty minutes or so of this fruitless thought, Julian saw a fellow St. Eligius student walking across the lobby towards the doors, tall, black-haired, lean, with mocha skin. It was Ryan Williams. He must have arrived on the same train, and then stopped to get something to eat before leaving the station. Ryan was a junior and a prefect, as well as a leading rower, and he lived on the same floor of Mansfield dorm as Julian, down the hall and around the corner. Julian had not sought out any friends at school. He got along with his roommate, John, but John was in his second year at St. Eligius, and had his own set of friends. The other students were generally very friendly, but when Julian kept to himself, they left him alone. Just now, though, Julian didn't want to keep to himself. Knowing that Ryan had his own car, Julian braced himself and approached him.

"Ryan! It's Julian Drake, 302."

"Oh, hi Julian. You don't have to remind me of your name and room, you know. I am one of your dorm prefects! Is the van here yet?"

"Yes, well, actually, I missed it. I was supposed to be on the next train, so they didn't wait for me."

"Do you want a ride?"

"Well, if it's not a problem, that would be great."

"It's not a problem. Let's go find my car."

Ryan was one of those kids whose parents saw nothing wrong with their son having a fast car when he turned sixteen and got his license. Walking into the parking lot beside the station, Ryan led the way to a new blue Ford Mustang.

"Wow," Julian said, with feeling.

"It's not a GT; it only has a six, but still, it's pretty cool."

Julian stood awkwardly with the box and his bag, unsure of where to put them. Ryan opened the trunk with his remote, and as Julian reached to load his things, he asked what was in the box.

Suddenly aware of how strange it would seem that he was bringing an antique clock back to school with him, Julian replied haltingly:

"It's . . . it's a, well, look."

Julian opened the flaps of the box and drew aside the bubble wrap, revealing the clock perched incongruously amidst the clear plastic.

"Cool!" said Ryan. "Where'd ya get it?"

"From home. My Dad is moving, and he was going to throw it out. It belonged to my great-grandfather, and I just couldn't leave it. So I brought it with me."

Julian repacked the box, Ryan slammed the trunk lid, and they got into the car. As he turned the key and the engine rumbled to life, Ryan said,

"It's kinda strange that your Dad wanted to get rid of that clock. It seems like a pretty nice thing."

Seeing Julian's frown, and sensing that he might be touching on a sore subject, Ryan went on:

"Are you going to keep it in your room?"

"Yes."

"I hope it doesn't make too much noise. The school might not let you have it if it bothers other students."

"I know, but I guess I was hoping that they wouldn't notice."

"Maybe they won't." Ryan then seemed to make an effort to change the subject:

"We must have come in on the same train. You're from D.C., right?"

"Bethesda, outside D.C. in Maryland," said Julian. "But my Dad is moving next week, to Vienna, in northern Virginia."

"I'm from New Jersey," replied Ryan. "My parents won't let me drive all the way home except at the end of term, but I convinced them to let me come this far."

The rest of the ride back they talked about the schools they had come from. Julian learned that, like him, Ryan came from a large high school, and his parents had sent him away to school because he wasn't working up to his potential and seemed lost in his school at home. Julian also learned that Ryan liked St. Eligius:

"The place grows on you, ya know? I didn't really like it when I got there, but it feels like home now. Some of the teachers are really cool, like Dr. Gregory, and they really care, and help you when you need it. I think a lot of them could be college professors. They're so smart and so into what

they teach. I liked some of my teachers at my old school, but the classes were so big, they didn't really have time."

"My school was like that too. I used to be a pretty good student, but I guess I just want to be under the radar. It kind of freaks me out about Eligius, that you can't really do that."

"Yeah. You can't. But they're not out to get you. They just want you to learn. Like Ms. Sayer. When I first met her, I thought, 'Ugh, a chaplain, this will be lame. But I'm taking her class this year—you have to take it as a junior or senior—and it's really cool. She doesn't tell you what to think, but she makes you think about all sorts of cool stuff. I like it. Sometimes I feel like my head will explode, but I like it."

"Uh, well, maybe I need to give it more of a chance."

"Give it time. Even dorm. I like being on dorm. It's like college life, I bet."

So Ryan was another who liked the school. Julian found himself wishing he felt the same way. But he felt nothing. Maybe having the clock would help. Again, he laughed at himself. As if it were some kind of talisman that was going to protect him and make his life happy!

"Gregory teaches science?" Julian asked.

"Yeah. He teaches biology and physics, but he's got a Ph.D. in oceanography, and he did research in Antarctica, so he has lots of cool stories about being stuck in the ice."

Julian's thoughts about how interesting that might be were swept away by the car turning into the campus of St. Eligius. They had been out in the country for a while now, having passed over bridges of several rivers that flowed through the Tidewater region of the state, and gone through several small towns that didn't have much besides a gas station, a few restaurants, and antique stores. Even the county seat of Wiltshire County, Wilton, didn't have much in it besides the courthouse and Sheriff's office. Now they were three miles past Wilton, and were turning into a drive that went between a cornfield and immaculate playing fields: field hockey, baseball, soccer, and lacrosse. At the top of the drive were flagpoles with the U.S., Virginia, and Episcopal Church flags, and a neatly lettered sign that said "St. Eligius Episcopal School. Founded A.D. 1921"

Lined with trees, the drive gently wound its way between the fields, finally passing the gymnasium on the right. Julian turned right after the gym

and followed the drive around to the parking lot, passing along the way the fine arts building and the chapel and ending at the lot in front of the admissions and administration building.

As they got out of the car, Ryan pocketed the keys slowly. Julian knew that he would have to turn them in to the Dorm Master when they got to their floor. While there were a few day students from the surrounding area, most students were boarders, and they were not allowed to use their cars, if they had them, without permission. They walked across campus with their burdens, making their way between the chapel and art building and out into the main quad. Two large academic buildings dominated the quad: Bunson Hall, home of math, science, and theology, on the right, and Bishop Bowes Hall, home of English, history, language and the library, on the left. The two buildings were twins, Bunson being modelled on Bishop when it was added to the campus in the 1970s. Both buildings were four story, red brick classroom buildings, crowned with slate roofs and dormer windows. The classrooms behind those dormers were a little cramped, but Julian did like the old-fashioned feel they gave the rooms. Bishop Bowes, and the Headmaster's house situated in the middle of the quad, dated back to the early 20th century when the school was founded. Beyond Bunson was the girls dormitory, Mcguire Hall, while on the other end of Bowes was Mansfield Hall, the boys dorm. Between these buildings was the student center and dining hall, and an expanse of grass that stretched away to the top of a hill ("the Hill"). At the edge of the quad, an enormous oak tree looked down the hill to the river, a half-mile away in the distance. Below the Hill, filling the space between the main campus and the river, was the beautiful expanse of Parker's Piece, a tree-lined meadow crossed by walking paths between areas of grass and wildflowers.

Walking past the corner of Bishop Bowes, the two boys passed the Headmaster's House on the right and headed on to Mansfield Dorm.

Walking in the main doors, they stopped in the Duty Office—empty until 7:30—to sign in and check the schedule for the evening. When they had climbed the stairs and reached 302, Julian thanked Ryan for the ride, and Ryan continued on down the hall with a friendly "See ya later, Julian. Let me know when you get the clock working. I'd like to see it."

Julian put down the box and his bag in the hall and fished for his room key. The hallways in the dorm were cinderblock, painted white with blue

accents, and each room had a sign beside it with the names of the boarders and where they were from. John was from Fredericksburg, just south of Washington. He wasn't back yet; it was 6:00 now, and boarders had until 7:30 to be back from break in order to be ready for the evening routine at 8:00. Finding his key, Julian unlocked the door and pushed it open, dragging his stuff behind him. The room was adequate for two boys, providing each with a bunk and a wardrobe, in addition to built in desks, dressers, and a sink on the wall to the right as he entered the room. A single large window dominated the far wall, and the other two were masked by posters and the bunk beds. Once in the room Julian threw his bag on his bunk (the upper one) and opened the box. Shaking the clock free from the bubble wrap, he set it on his desk. Then he dug through a drawer, found a clean sock, and wetting it at the sink, he began carefully to clean the dust from the clock. Once he had most of the dust off, he re-hung the pendulum and reached for the clock key. He frowned to see that his hand trembled slightly as he fit the key into the hole in the clock face to wind it. It didn't really need winding. That done, he returned the key to the bottom of the clock, set the pendulum swinging, closed the glass door, and sat back in his desk chair and watched the pendulum trace its steady rhythm.

As he watched, Julian realized that he was hoping the feeling he had gotten the first time he wound the clock would return. To his surprise, he found that it did. That same sense of regular, reliable motion, of supporting steadiness, of an immutable presence unaffected by change or chaos washed over him. Julian felt that as long as whatever this was that he had discovered was there, he could handle the rest of what happened to him. Some part of him thought this was crazy, but part of him also knew it was real.

He knew that John would soon come back, and that the evening routine would soon begin--and he would have to explain the clock. Right at that moment, though, all that didn't bother Julian. He had found something that made him feel at home.

Chapter Four: On Dorm

Dinner on Sunday nights was usually poorly attended, and this was especially true on the night when the students were due back from a break.

The dining hall itself was a long room that filled the ground floor of the student center, one end covered with windows that looked out past the oak tree on the Hill down to Parker's Piece. With drink machines at the end where the entrance to the kitchen and serving line was, a salad and pasta bar in the middle, and tables filling the rest of the space, it was a pretty crowded room, except on Sunday nights. So many kids returned to campus after dinner that the dining hall staff did something simple, and Julian ended up having spaghetti from the pasta bar that was available every night. He didn't think much of the stuffed mushroom or the chicken-fried steak that were the other options. He ate his spaghetti by himself, after declining an offer from one of the teachers on duty to sit with him.

Finishing his meager dinner, Julian left the dining hall by the doors facing the Hill to return to dorm. He stopped for a moment to look down, down past the spreading branches of the enormous old oak tree to the expanse of Parker's Piece. From this distance, the paths that bisected the meadow made it almost look like farmland seen from an airplane. Beyond that, the river, visible between gaps in the trees below Parker's Piece, glinted silver in the light of the setting sun.

Julian let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding and then turned towards Mansfield. The dorm had three stairwells, one at each end and one in the middle. Walking up the middle flight, he ran into Mr. Watt. Watt was a ninth grade science teacher and a dorm master, which meant that he lived in an apartment at the end of a hallway on dorm. He had perpetually tousled brown hair, a full beard, and usually a smile. Though Julian did not have him as a teacher, he liked Mr. Watt because he was kind of crazy. He seemed to think nothing of joking around and acting strangely in public, and he had a reputation among the kids as being kooky but fun. Julian was glad Mr. Watt was one of the dorm parents on his hall; he had heard that Mr. Hall, the soccer coach who lived at one end of Second, was really a jerk and did things like make the kids on his hall take out his trash when it began to smell.

"Hey Julian! Did you have a nice break?" Mr. Watt asked in his enthusiastic way.

Hesitating, Julian replied, "Yeah, I guess so." He wasn't about to go into the fact that his father had told him that he was remarrying, nor did he feel like discussing the clock with a teacher, even one as friendly as Mr. Watt.

“Julian, buck up, kid. You really have to give the place a chance.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right, Mr. Watt.”

“Well, I can tell you don’t see it yet, but hang in there, and if I can ever help, you just let me know, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Now, it’s almost time for Routine to start; you better head upstairs.”

“Okay. See ya, Mr. Watt.”

Julian continued on up the stairs, and then down the hall towards his room. With the nightly routine beginning soon, students were drifting onto hall, dragging book bags and duffels. Steam and the sound of falling water came from the hall bathroom, and music blared from open doors as Julian walked by. As Julian walked down the hall, he thought about how strange it was for a school in the middle of nowhere in Virginia to have so many different types of students. He couldn’t remember the exact details, but he knew from his own experience that there were students at St. Eligius from many different countries as well as a lot of states. It was normal to hear different accents and different kinds of music on any dorm hall. The nightly routine depended on how kids were doing academically. Sunday nights always had a study hall for everyone in their room as a way to get organized for the week. But the other weeknights offered some choice. Students might be in an assigned study hall in a classroom, if their grades warranted that, but if kids used their time well and were doing well, they had some choice as to how they spent the evening. The art and music rooms, the maker lab, the library, the weight room, and their own rooms on dorm were all options. The teachers on duty each evening circulated between these places.

Entering his room, Julian saw that John was back, lounging on his bunk, dressed in a close-fitting workout shirt and loose pants. Though John was also a sophomore, and also a white kid from the suburbs—in John’s case the affluent West End of Richmond—there the similarities between him and Julian ended. John was nice enough, but he was one of those kids who were at boarding school not because of declining grades and divorced parents, but because of parents whose careers were too busy for a mischievous teenager prone to partying and fun more than taking his future in business seriously. John was open about it and reveled in the gifts that his parents gave him as compensation for the lack of their attention. John did not seem to mind St. Eligius, as he had figured out how to make life at school work for him. He

did enough work to get by and went home on weekends whenever he could, to a normally empty and unsupervised house and car. John and Julian got along OK, but they were not really friends. John was very outgoing, social, and abrupt, and Julian had been very quiet since arriving at school.

“Hey, Ju”—Julian inwardly winced at the uninvited nickname—“What the hell is that?” John said as Julian walked in. So like John, this direct outburst, and Julian immediately knew he meant the clock. Julian also knew he didn’t necessarily mean to be offensive, but Julian still found it hard to take.

“It’s a clock . . . it belonged to my great-grandfather.”

“Why’d ya bring it here?”

“I don’t know . . . my dad was going to give it away and I didn’t want him to.”

“Weird.” John said. “It looks so old.”

At that Sean, the prefect on duty, walked by, on his way to the duty office at the end of the hall.

“Time for Sunday study hall, guys! Turn in your cell phones! Music off, laptops out! Let’s go!” Sean was gone again as quickly as he had appeared. Julian turned to take his cell phone to the duty office.

“Take mine, will ya?” said John. Julian grabbed John’s phone off his bureau and left the room, walking past two dorm rooms to the duty office, itself a converted dorm room. He slipped the two phones into their slots (each bearing its owner’s name) in the rack by the door and returned to the room. Just as he walked in the door, Julian froze. He had forgotten that that clock would strike the hours and half-hours. Listening, Julian heard the quiet whir of the gears and then the first tone as the clock began tolling eight times to mark the hour and the beginning of study hall. John looked up, startled, and said,

“I’m not going to listen to *that* all through study hall!”

“Just give it a chance. It kinda grows on you.”

“Well, all right,” John said, giving him an odd look. “But I’m not seeing it.”

The boys settled down at their desks, opening up laptops to check their homework on the school website, beginning to work. It was hard to settle in after a long weekend. Julian didn’t have much routine homework, but he did have an English essay to work on, and he began digging through *All Quiet on*

the Western Front to look for supporting evidence for his thesis. It was a good, if depressing, book, and at least at times Julian found himself identifying a little bit with the disillusionment of the World War I protagonist. Tonight, however, he could not focus. He found he was dreading the approaching half hour.

Sure enough, as 8:30 came, the clock whirred again, and a two-note tone struck to mark the half hour. "Shut that thing up, will you?" John said irritably.

"It's done, that's all it does." But John glared at him. Julian began to feel a pit in his stomach. He couldn't explain it, but he did not want to stop the clock. In the sound of its regular ticking, his normal worries vanished. Unfortunately, now they were replaced with concern about the clock itself. But it felt good to care about something. Where he normally would have been apathetic and let John have his way, this time it was different. He did not want to give ground.

As the clock began to strike nine, Sean walked by. Hearing the chiming of the clock, he walked in, to hear John and Julian arguing over the noise. Sean, his forehead below his red hair wrinkling with frown lines, was quick to make it clear how he viewed things:

"Whose is that? It makes too much noise during Study Hall."

"See?" said John. "You can't leave it running with all that racket."

"It's mine, Sean," Julian said.

"I'll have to get Mr. Harris," Sean said.

Inwardly, Julian groaned. All the students knew Mr. Harris as really strict; he enforced the rules, whether they made sense or not. When Mr. Harris appeared, his bald head was tinged with pink, showing his annoyance at having to intervene in a situation in the middle of study hall. Responding to Mr. Harris' question about the clock, Julian tried to keep the plaintiveness out of his voice.

"It . . . it belonged to my great-grandfather, and, uh . . . it means a lot to me."

"Sorry, Julian. It can't be in here if it's going to make that much noise during study hall, and I will have to write it up for Mr. Perry." Julian knew what that meant. Mr. Perry was the Dean of Students, responsible for discipline at St. Eligius. Being written up for Mr. Perry inevitably meant

demerits or worse. Mr. Perry, Julian knew, tried to be fair, but he was also pretty strict.

“Can’t I just silence the chime? If I don’t wind that part, it won’t make the noise.”

“It will still make that stupid ticking sound,” interjected John, and Julian knew he was right.

From the doorway, Ryan’s voice cut into the argument: “Can’t he keep it, Mr. Harris? It’s kinda cool. Doncha think it adds to the room? I mean, everything else here is standard issue, this is different. Can’t he keep it if it’s quiet?” Ryan, though he was not the prefect on duty that night, had the privilege to move around the hall and to assist the teacher on duty, though Mr. Harris was so active there was usually little for the prefects to do when he was around.

“No!” yelled John.

“Sorry, Julian,” said Mr. Harris, ignoring John’s outburst. “I’ve got to keep the peace. It’s got to go, at least for tonight. You can discuss it with Mr. Perry tomorrow, but for tonight, it’s mine. If you want, you can carry it to the duty office so it doesn’t get damaged.”

Without speaking, Julian opened the glass door of the clock and slowly reached in to the swinging pendulum, grasping it and stopping its regular motion. For that brief moment he felt hope. He wondered again why the clock was reassuring, why it seemed to comfort him. Closing the door, he saw Ryan’s face reflected in the glass, and he saw sympathy there. Sighing, he got up and carefully carried the clock down the hall, drawing stares from some of the boys as he passed their rooms. He left it on the desk, not really hearing Mr. Harris’ reassurances that it would be safe. He knew that the rest of study hall would be like it used to be: boring and pointless, and he returned to his room for the second half, finding the silence eerie.

At 10:00 Sean called “Study Hall’s over!” and the assigned students began dragging out vacuums to clean up the hall as post-study hall chaos erupted. Remembering the look on Ryan’s face, Julian decided to seek him out. Finding Ryan’s room, Julian saw that neither he nor his roommate Sean were there. They were on hall, checking to make sure the kids were taking the trash out and cleaning as they were supposed to. Julian hesitated in the doorway, looking at the posters of sports teams on the walls. He realized that Ryan was more normal than he was. Julian knew that Ryan, with his

easygoing personality, was a kid who fit in wherever he was. Why would he be interested in Julian and his problems? But before he could flee, Ryan himself walked up.

“What's up, Julian?” he said. Julian took the plunge.

“I just wanted to say thanks for sticking up for me with Harris.”

“Hey, no problem. John can be kinda bossy, and you know how Harris is. If there is a rule, he'll stick to it, and the big rule at night is no disturbing study hall. But that clock *is* kinda cool.”

“Well, it's weird. I know it was strange to bring it here, but it really affects me somehow.”

“How?”

“Well . . . it's the way it makes me feel. The first time I wound it, when I found it this morning. . . . When the clock started ticking, it changed everything. I dunno, it's like everything I've been worrying about didn't matter. I felt . . . relieved, I guess. That's why I wanted to bring it back. My parents divorced a year ago, and my dad's getting remarried, and . . .” To Julian's immense surprise, it all came pouring out. How he no longer felt that he belonged anywhere, how it seemed that there was no place for him, not at home, not here. “But for a few seconds, when I started the clock, that feeling went away, I felt like I was at home, like I had a place . . .” Julian paused. “You probably think I'm really whacked, but anyway, that's how it makes me feel. That's why I brought it back. Maybe it's because it belonged to my great-grandfather, but it affects me for some reason. It's the only piece of home I have left.” Ryan listened to this patiently, with apparent interest. When Julian had finished, he just said,

“It's okay, ya know. You don't have to be ashamed of it. You've gone through a lot, and you haven't really adjusted here yet. If the clock makes you feel better, what's wrong with that? I just wish Harris was a little more flexible. But don't worry about it. I'll talk to Mr. Perry for you. Maybe he'll let you keep it.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Julian agreed, but he didn't really believe it. He did appreciate Ryan's sympathy, though. “Hey, thanks.”

“No problem, man. And hey, Julian, you have to give the Saint a chance. It's not that bad. After two years, this place feels like home to me.”

“Yeah, you're right I guess. I'll try. Well, see you tomorrow.” Julian returned to his room, feeling a little better, but dreading what tomorrow

would bring.

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St. Eligius held three classes each day, which ran for 85 minutes each. Students had a total of six classes, three meeting one day, three the next. In between the morning classes was chapel Mondays and Fridays, assembly on Wednesday, and just a break on Tuesday and Thursday. After second class was lunch and then the final class of the day, followed by a help period. The next morning after chapel, Julian got what he was expecting, a summons to the Dean's Office. Mr. Perry was waiting for him, and on his desk was the clock, still and silent. Mr. Perry was a tall, broad-shouldered African-American, a crisp, neat person, with closely trimmed hair and perfect clothes. He was clearly retired military—a captain, in fact, with his diploma from West Point on one office wall. What hope did Julian have of explaining to him how the clock made him feel? And even if he did, how would it make any difference?

The conversation went as he expected, but Mr. Perry was quite supportive and did give him a choice: either keep the clock but not run it, so it was silent, or collect the clock from Mr. Perry at Thanksgiving Break to take home. The good news was that Julian would receive no demerits. In Mr. Perry's view, it was just a misunderstanding, not any kind of willful disobedience: “Ryan Williams put in a good word for you. He is a good prefect, and I trust his judgment.” But at that moment, Dr. Stephens, the Headmaster, opened the door, walked in, and sat down. Dr. Stephens was altogether different from the Dean of Students. His graying hair topped a pink face wrinkled by smile lines, and something about his clothes--the brown and gray hues, the suggestion of wrinkles--conveyed that the Headmaster was a man of books, of scholarship, a teacher first and foremost.

“Hello, Mr. Perry. Hello, Julian. How are you?” Dr. Stephens' voice was kind, and he seemed genuinely inquisitive. “I heard a little about this incident from Mr. Harris at breakfast, and I am curious to know more. Please tell me what Ryan had to say about this.” The students generally liked Dr. Stephens. He had a doctorate in history, and lots of books in his office, and sometimes he had a funny, academic way of talking, but he was never intimidating, and the seniors talked about how good his one class—

Senior Seminar—was. He took an interest in each student, knowing each one by name, but so far Julian had rebuffed that interest.

Mr. Perry responded, “Well, sir, Ryan just said that Julian has been going through a hard time. His parents have divorced in the last year, his dad is remarrying and just moved, and the clock belonged to Julian's great-grandfather, and is the last thing he has left from his old home. Julian confirmed all of that.”

Julian found himself nodding as he listened, and he looked at the Headmaster doubtfully, feeling himself exposed. Mr. Perry continued,

“Ryan asked that Julian be allowed to keep the clock in his room, which Julian has also requested. However, that really is not possible due to the noise it makes, even if the chime is not wound.”

“May I hear it?” asked Dr. Stephens in his unfailingly polite manner.

“Of course,” said Mr. Perry. “Julian, would you like to do the honors?” Julian nodded, got up, and walked over to the desk where the clock sat. He opened the door, hesitated a moment, and pushed the pendulum to set the clock moving. The ticking began.

“It won't chime for a while, and that's how you'd hear the real noise it makes.”

“May I?” asked Dr. Stephens, and when Julian nodded, he put his index finger below the minute hand and gently moved the hand up to the twelve. Reaching eleven o'clock, the clock began to strike, each toll seeming to reach out to Julian with its reassurance. The Headmaster listened intently, all the while watching Julian's face.

“Remarkable,” he said. He paused for a long moment, and then addressed them in turn. “Mr. Perry, please have Mr. Grinnell move the clock to my office. Julian, I don't have time to discuss this further right now, but I would appreciate it if you could come by my office immediately after last bell. I would like to talk with you further about this.”

“Certainly, sir” said Mr. Perry. Though he may have wondered at the Headmaster's request, he also trusted Dr. Stephens and inherently respected authority.

“Uh, OK, Dr. Stephens,” said Julian. Dr. Stephens smiled.

“Don't worry, you're not in trouble. I'd just like to hear more about your clock.” Relieved but puzzled, Julian filed out, grabbed his book bag, and headed off to class.

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3:30 came very slowly that day, with English (Ms. Paulette) and math (Mr. Wiley) still to get through. English saw the class in a discussion of the turn European literature took with World War I and how *All Quiet on the Western Front* fit into that protest against the old order of things that had led the continent to destruction. Ms. Paulette, a woman of piercing intelligence, dark, shoulder-length hair flecked with grey, and an obvious passion for her subject, did manage to keep Julian engaged. But he loved history, and this was a topic that brought history into the literature. Math—Algebra II—was part of their unit on quadratics, and despite Mr. Wiley’s efforts, it did not hold Julian’s attention. Mr. Wiley also loved his subject, and he seemed to understand how much it intimidated many students. He was great at giving confidence, his youthful face and shaggy brown hair putting students at ease. But today there was just too much competition for Julian’s attention.

At last the day reached the free time between classes and athletics. Before he changed his clothes and headed down to the river for crew, before even getting a snack, he headed for the administration building that housed the Headmaster’s office. Like most buildings on the campus, the administration building was colonial, with red brick and white trim. Julian had not entered the building since his admissions interview months before, and he approached it with trepidation. What could Dr. Stephens possibly want of him? Why was the clock in his office? Swallowing his misgivings, he entered the building, passed through the admissions waiting area, and found himself telling the Headmaster’s assistant, Mrs. Hampstead, that he was here to see Dr. Stephens. She told him to wait on the coach outside the office, and Julian did so, though he had hardly sat down when Dr. Stephens himself came out of the double doors of his office and asked him to come in.

If Dr. Stephens was not scary, his office certainly was. A large, imposing desk sat to one side of the darkly paneled room, in front of two huge windows. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, filled to their brims, covered two other walls of the room, while the last wall contained portraits of past Headmasters as well as Dr. Stephens’ academic degrees. The desk, Julian noticed, was amazingly neat, occupied only by an old-fashioned green-shaded bankers lamp, a laptop, a few pieces of paper—and the clock.

“Come in, Julian, come in. May I offer you something to drink?”

Still reeling at being in the Headmaster’s office, Julian declined, he hoped politely. “Sir,” he went on, “If I am not in trouble, why am I here?”

“You get right to the point, don't you?”

“To be honest, I'm a little scared.”

“I suppose that's understandable, but really, you don't have to be. Have a seat and I will tell all, or, at least, all I know. Julian, I am very interested in your clock. I would like to hear from you in your own words what you know about it.”

Thinking this was strange, but wanting to be helpful, Julian sat down in one of the two chairs in front of the desk, while Dr. Stephens took the other. Julian said,

“Well, it's been in my house at home--the house we're moving from anyway--ever since I can remember. I played around with it some when I was younger. I remember my dad showing me how to wind it, and I always liked it. My dad told me it came from my great-grandfather, who died before I was born. I don't know much else, except that when I got home for Long Weekend, my dad was going to get rid of it. I couldn't believe it; it made me angry.”

“Why, if I may ask? It's just an old clock, and you, like most of your peers, use your cell phone and computer to tell time, don't you?”

“Yeah, I do, but, I dunno . . . there's something about it. When I came across it in the den, I wound it and set it going, and there's just something about it. It gives me a feeling, like, like I'm at home, even though I wasn't. It made me feel like everything that bothered me, my folks splitting up, going off to school, my dad getting remarried, having to move, all that didn't matter, that despite having everything taken away from me, I still have a place.”

“Have you looked at it closely?”

“Yeah. Well, at least, I cleaned it up some, got the dust off.”

“Did you look at the bottom?”

“No. I never have. Why?”

“Let's take a look, shall we? You go ahead.”

Julian turned to the clock on the desk and carefully laid it on its back. The pendulum jangled slightly as Julian set the clock down, and then he gasped as he saw what was on the bottom. A tarnished brass plate, its

writing a little difficult to read due to the dirt covering it and the old-fashioned script, said:

Ernest L. Drake, D. Phil.,
St. Eligius School for Boys,
Presents this on the Founding of Kleinert Library,
as a Guide to Headmasters Present and Future.
A.D. 1921

“This, this came from here, from St. Eligius!?”

“It not only came from here, Julian, your great-grandfather gave it as a gift to the school, back when the school was a boys school, right when it was founded.”

“In 1920? A.D. means *Anno Domini*, right, “in the year of Our Lord”?”

“Very good, Julian. We've taught you something, then, or you are a reader.”

Julian grinned quickly at this complement, and said, “I had no idea it came from here; I thought it was just his, like at home or something. If he gave it to the school, how did we get it? And why would a clock be a guide to headmasters? That's weird.”

Dr. Stephens looked at Stephen before answering. “It *is* odd, isn't it? As to how your family came to have it when your great-grandfather gave it to the school, well, obviously he took it with him when he left. It's a little unclear, as the records are incomplete from those days, when the school was just beginning, but I believe that your grandfather left the school unhappy, and may even have been forced out. That would explain why he took the clock with him. As to why he describes the clock as a guide to headmasters, I have no idea. But as the current Headmaster, I would like to find out.”

Dr. Stephens paused to look around the room at the bookshelves. “Before I became a headmaster I was a history master, and history is still a great love of mine, though I don't teach or write very much anymore. Your grandfather was a history master too, did you know that? Well, a hobby of mine is the history of St. Eligius, and in the archives in the library I have found references to a clock like this one, presented to the school when the library was built. I have also found some indications that there was a division on the faculty at that time and that your great-grandfather left when that division became ugly. So, when Mr. Harris told me this morning that Julian Drake, whom I know to be the great-grandson of a revered history master at

the school, one who gave the school a clock that vanished long ago, has an old clock in his dorm room, and insists on having it run during study hall, I took notice.”

“Julian, I agree with Mr. Perry that the clock can't remain in your dorm room. It *may* be a bit loud, but it's also too valuable. With your permission, I would like to return this clock to its rightful place in Kleinert Library. I think the school should have this as a part of its history, and that way you can see it and hear it whenever you like.”

“You’re asking *my* permission? Well, of course, that's fine. That's much better than I hoped for. It will get to keep running, and I'll be able to see it anytime.”

“Perhaps it will make the library a place you want to be and those grades will improve, eh?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, that's all, Julian. I am going to continue, if I have time, to research this clock of yours. I may ask Ms. Sayer to look into for me. But in the meantime, St. Eligius is honored to have it back, and we will restore it to its place of honor in the second floor overlook. Now, it's about time you head to crew, isn't it?”

“Yes, I need to change first. Thank you, sir.”

Julian let himself out, and found himself feeling excited for the first time since going away to school. He was excited about the clock, about Dr. Stephen's interest and his discoveries, and he was excited to tell Ryan about it all. He was a little uncertain about Ms. Sayer, the chaplain, being involved, but she seemed nice enough, and Ryan had spoken highly of her.

Slipping his book bag over his shoulder, Julian left the Admin building and began the run across the quad to Mansfield dorm, for the first time feeling some sense of connection to the place.

Chapter Five: Parker’s Piece

Julian was nearly late to practice, having to run from the dorm, down the Hill, and across Parker's Piece, the meadow that stretched between the Hill and the River. Ms. Yates, a thin, incredibly energetic woman who seemed to be made of tense wire, was a former college rowing coach and she

really knew her business, and that started with expecting everyone at practice on time. Practice was the usual mix of running laps around the meadow, and then, for the novices like Julian, spending time in the training barge, a long, low boat with seats and oars that allowed the novices to learn how to handle oars without capsizing a crew shell. Real rowers like Ryan spent their time in the shells, four of them plus a fifth, smaller coxswain. Julian had watched with fascination one of the coxswains, a short girl with a Scottish accent and longish dark hair, sitting backwards in the bow of the shell, wearing a headset microphone and calling out the strokes to the rowers. Julian couldn't imagine being able to do it himself, but he enjoyed watching the shells skim across the water.

On the way back from practice, he found himself talking to Ryan excitedly about what had happened that afternoon. Ryan was impressed. "You mean it's going to be in the library, up on second, where the awards and trophy cases are? That's cool."

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From that afternoon, Julian's life took on a different character at St. Eligius. Ryan certainly had plenty of friends, including Hieu Nguyen, a senior on the team, but he and Julian began to hang around together. Julian appreciated Ryan's acceptance and support, but it became more than that. Ryan discovered that when Julian applied himself, he was really good at school, good enough to help Ryan when he struggled, especially in AP History. Julian found Ryan's sense of humor really funny, a buoy to his own rather cynical nature. They took to spending time together in the evenings. Julian even sat with Ryan at lunch sometimes, though he couldn't always participate in the conversations about sports. And what is more, Julian found that helping Ryan stimulated his own interest in his classes. While he did not particularly enjoy his Algebra II class with Mr. Wiley, he admitted to himself that Mr. Wiley taught well, making his students wrestle with thinking mathematically, rather than just memorize formulas. For the first time he found that chemistry was interesting, and his European History and English II classes were especially engaging. The style most teachers used at St. Eligius' was different than at the public school Julian had attended. Not that he didn't have some good teachers there, but the classes were so much

smaller here, it allowed the teachers to challenge the kids in ways Julian wasn't used to. He had found it disconcerting, even scary, but now he began to cautiously welcome the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions from Dr. Baker, his history teacher, and from Ms. Paulette.

One day, a week after Julian's meeting with the Headmaster, Dr. Stephens made an announcement at Wednesday assembly that immediately caught Julian's attention. On the mornings with Morning Prayer service, there were usually no announcements. On Wednesdays, however, Dr. Stephens led the assembly instead of Chaplain Sayer, and he usually called on teachers and students who wished to make announcements. In chapel and assembly, the students sat in the pews of the chapel, each pew assigned to an advisory group of six students and one advisor. Today Dr. Stephens began with an announcement that most students didn't really take much interest in, but which made Julian jerk to attention.

"I am pleased to announce that beginning today, an old heirloom of St. Eligius comes home. Back in 1921, to celebrate the founding of the library, Dr. Ernest Drake, a history master and great-grandfather of our own 10th-grader, Julian Drake, presented a clock to the school. The clock was engraved with a plate announcing the occasion, and was placed in the stacks on the second floor of the library, where its chimes could be heard--faintly--downstairs as well. Some of you may recall that St. Eligius was a seventh-century metal smith and master of the King's mint in Paris, who was renowned for his generosity to the poor. He went on to become a priest, and eventually a saint, in fact the patron saint of smiths, craftsman, and clockmakers. Undoubtedly that is the reason for the nature of Dr. Drake's gift to the school. Unfortunately, when Dr. Drake left the school, the clock went with him. Until today. Last week, Julian brought that clock back to our campus, and it once again resides in Kleinert Library, for everyone's pleasure and edification."

While Julian knew that he was unknown to many students, he felt the eyes of his teachers, and a few students, on him, and he tried to ignore them. The rest of assembly seemed to stretch out forever, and Julian could barely restrain himself long enough to acknowledge the congratulations of Mr. Halpern, his advisor, before he joined the throng leaving the chapel. Glancing at his silenced cell phone, he was relieved to see that he still had ten minutes before second bell, and he made his way down the walk outside the

chapel, up the stairs, and in the main doors of Bishop Bowes Hall. Kleinert Library occupied part of the first two floors of the building, with the first floor holding study tables and fiction and the second stacks of academic research books. Julian climbed the stairs to the second floor, pulled open the door, and entered the stacks. The second floor did not have any study areas, and the stacks stretched along each side of the room, overlooking two symmetrical balconies down to the first floor. The only area bare of shelves was a recessed alcove beside the door, which contained glass cases with school trophies and other memorabilia. It also contained open shelves with a copy of each year's yearbook, dating back decades, and, Julian saw, the clock.

Occupying a middle shelf, it looked cleaner but otherwise unchanged. He could hear the rhythm of its ticking, which seemed quiet, barely audible in the large space of the library. In front of the clock was a small plaque that read:

Gift of Dr. Ernest Drake, History Master, 1921
and his great-grandson, Julian Drake, class of 2013

Standing before the clock, once again Julian felt it. Change and anxiety and stress just seemed to vanish, absorbed by a sense of calm, enduring, being. He felt baffled by it but comforted too. Not that it took away problems, but it was as if in the clock's presence, he knew the problems were just not that important and that he could deal with them.

At that moment Ryan walked through the doorway. "Hey, Julian, is it there?"

Without turning away from the clock, Julian said quietly, "Tell me if you notice it too. Remember what I was telling you before, about how it made me feel? Well, it's working here too. Can you . . . can you feel anything? Or am I totally crazy?"

Ryan hesitated, and then said, "I can feel, well, peaceful I guess, like everything's OK. But it is, isn't it? Is that so strange?"

"But everything's not always OK. Maybe I feel it more intensely because of what's been happening with me lately. But somehow, I think this clock exudes a sense of peace, of having a place, maybe of being connected."

"Exudes? What's that mean? You're killin' me with the weird words."

"You know, put out or flow from inside something."

“Yeah, I think you're right. It kinda reminds me of Parker's Piece.” In response to Julian's blank stare, Ryan added, “You know, that field, the meadow on the way down to the river.”

Julian nodded, thinking of the beautiful meadow that sloped down to the river. “I don't know what this means, but Dr. Stephens was really interested in the clock, and he said he was going to ask Ms. Sayer to check out its history. I wonder if this is why, and it's not just because of the historical connection. How could a clock do that? I mean the feeling's real, or it seems real, but how could it do that?”

“I dunno. But Julian, you shouldn't worry about it. Just count your blessings, ya know?”

“Maybe you're right. But it's so strange. Good, but strange. I've read about magical objects in a lot of books and, at least in books, you know if something is evil, it feels malevolent.”

In response to Ryan's blank stare, Julian went on, “Uh, it feels like it has evil intent. This just feels peaceful and reassuring. It doesn't seem like it's bad, just magic somehow.”

“Whatever it is, I know we need to get to class if we don't want to be hangin' with Mr. Perry later.”

“Jeesh, you're right,” Julian said, glancing at the clock for the time. “We'd better go.” Walking out down the steps, the two boys didn't say anything more, each mulling his thoughts. Any further conversation would have to wait until practice that afternoon.

For Julian, the fact that Ryan also felt something in the presence of the clock was a milestone. He wasn't crazy; there was something about the clock. . . . Something good which others could feel as well. Maybe it would make life better at St. Eligius. Maybe that's why his great-grandfather had donated the clock, to make life better at the school. But that raised obvious questions: *Where had Ernest Drake gotten a clock that did this? And how did the clock work?* These were questions never far from Julian's mind in the coming weeks. But they were not questions easy to answer.

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Weeks passed, and Julian's curiosity about the clock did not abate. He continued to do better in school, and he began to feel more at home. In his more cynical moments, he thought it was just because of the clock. He did

stop by and look at it, at least briefly, on most days. But deep down he also knew that it was because he now had a friend, and because he was beginning to acknowledge that the adults, at least some of them, did care about him. Though he didn't see Dr. Stephens much, he knew he took an interest. And he remembered that Dr. Stephens had said that he would ask Ms. Sayer to investigate the history of the clock. Julian wanted to go to one or the other of them and try to find out more, but he felt too shy, despite his desire to understand the clock. Yet even though he had not gone to either of them, he felt a connection to the school, and he knew it was because of the people.

Julian found himself once again overcoming his shyness with others around the time of the December meeting of the school's Board of Governors. Walking down to practice on a Thursday afternoon the week before Winter Break, he trailed behind most of the team across Parker's Piece. Julian was thinking about how beautiful the meadow really was, even on this brisk, early winter day. He and the rest of the team crossed it, and ran around it, nearly everyday, but did they really see it?

It was a big meadow; Julian had only the fuzziest idea that it must be twenty or so acres. It began at the foot of the Hill and stretched a good distance to the River. Surrounding it in a ring on all sides were enormous live oak trees whose branches grew wildly outwards and gradually drooped to the ground, so that you could easily sit on or climb into them. At the northern end, opposite the main campus, the trees grew here and there in a final band that opened onto the beach, where the crew barn and dock stood. A path led around the perimeter (used frequently for running by the team), and another led from the foot of the Hill down to the trees by the water. Benches perched periodically along the paths, most donated by graduating classes, and off the paths meadow grass and wild flowers grew, though at this time of year the flowers were gone and the grass was brown. Stopping at one of the benches, Julian could see, through the trees, the majestic sweep of the river, shallow but very wide, stretching across to the far shore a mile or more away. Turning his head, he could see the stately buildings of the campus looking down on him and on the river. The river beckoned from below. Though he didn't exactly relish running and rowing, he did like being on and near the water. The river was always there, always the same, and yet always changing. Its moods varied dramatically, with the wind and weather, but it

was always the river, always making sounds that were, even when violent, soothing. It's like the clock, Julian thought to himself. Or the clock is like it.

"Julian! Get moving! You don't want to be late!"

Ms. Yates' voice floated up to him from much further down the path to the river, and he realized he'd been stopped for too long. Just as he began to walk again, he heard footsteps approaching rapidly from behind, and he glanced back up the path. He saw Ryan and Hieu jogging down the path.

They slowed when they drew even with Julian, and Julian did his best to keep up.

Grinning, Hieu said, "Good job, Julian. I know you're still figuring this out, but you're getting there." Julian vaguely remembered that Hieu, a student from Vietnam, was known for his tech skills and for being outgoing. He certainly seemed friendly enough.

"Thanks," said Julian. "I got kind of caught up in just looking at the river."

Ryan said, "It *does* get to you, doesn't it? It's fabulous. I've been rowing for years, but I still don't get tired of the water."

Ryan paused and they jogged in silence for a while.

Hieu spoke up: "Have you considered doing anything with the team outside of practice? I know you don't get to go to races yet, but you know we do some community service, and the team would love to have you along."

Julian considered this. Outside of the occasional time when his mom or dad had decided the family should deliver food to a homeless shelter or nursing home, he had never really volunteered at anything.

"What kind of stuff do we do?"

"Well, it varies, but the next thing is actually tomorrow evening. The Board meets, and we've volunteered to serve and clean up dinner. It's to give the dining hall staff a break. It's not hard, and it's actually fun, and the food is great."

"What's the Board?"

Ryan put in, "It's the group who govern the school. They all have other jobs, but they volunteer to oversee the school. They hire Dr. Stephens to run the school, but he meets with them every two months to discuss budgets and plans and stuff. It's probably pretty boring, but they have a big dinner, and Ms. Yates signed us up to help out."

"Well . . ." Julian temporized.

Ryan snorted. “Don’t tell me you have plans! Most of us have used up our weekend leaves by this point. Believe me, this beats a trip to the Mart.”

“Well, OK. What time do I have to show up? And where?”

Hieu responded, “Just come to the dining hall at 5. We’ll get out of practice early for it, and from the dining hall we’ll head over. They’re not supposed to talk about official school business in front of us, so we have to wait until they’re ready to have dinner with the peons.”

“All right, sounds interesting. I’ll come.”

“Cool. You’ll have fun. Now, we better speed up and get to practice.”

They were gradually overtaking the rest of the team. Julian could see Ms. Yates’ tall form ahead, and he resigned himself to running faster across the rest of Parker’s Piece.

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If Julian had been dreading his community service, he quickly found his attitude changing as the evening went by. Meeting in the dining hall, ten members of the crew team, including Ryan, Hieu, and the dark-haired coxswain, filed into the kitchen under Hieu’s direction. Julian had never seen a kitchen so big before; he marveled at the huge dishwasher, mixer, fryers and other kitchen equipment and also found himself gasping a little at how hot it was in the room. He didn’t have long to suffer, though, as Chef Parslow quickly instructed the students to help themselves from a table laden with the advance party of the dining hall’s entries for the evening. Julian noticed that the ten of them could have made a fair picture in an admissions brochure, as they were a slice of student life at St. Eligius: America black and white, Vietnam, China, Ghana, Spain and Scotland were all represented. They all tucked in with the same will. Grinning, the chef promised them something better after their work was done and nodded to them, as if to say that the wait would be worth it. Once they had eaten enough to work for a while without complaint, Chef Parslow had each of them take command of a laden cart, and then he led them out the big double back doors of the kitchen, on their way to the board room. Parslow was a jolly, kind man, and he seemed to be pleased with the prospect of the evening ahead. Though he didn’t normally work in the evenings, tonight was special, and he was personally taking care of the board dinner.

After a few minutes of careful steering, they arrived at the basement of Bishop Bowes Hall and took turns riding the elevator to the top floor where the boardroom lay. When his turn came to enter the room, Julian gasped again. The room was clearly one of the oldest parts of the campus, with dark, wood-paneled walls elaborately carved, an impressively vaulted ceiling with massive wooden buttresses, and a set of dark tables arranged in a large square, open in the middle. Dr. Stephen's assistant, Mrs. Hampstead, was busy removing paperwork from the afternoon's meeting, while members of the dining hall staff, clearly glad to see the boys arriving to take their places, were putting the finishing touches on the table settings. Julian paused momentarily, as somehow he knew that, even though he had not known his great-grandfather, this room had been important to him, or at least that events important to him had happened here. When he paused, the girl behind him didn't notice at first and bumped into him.

"Sorry" she said in a lilting voice, the stress falling on the second syllable, her accent telling Julian she was the coxswain from Scotland.

Turning around, Julian said "No, it's my fault. Uh, I, I was just startled. I, um, my great-grandfather, he used to teach here and when I walked in, I just got this strong sense that he had been in this room, that it was important to him."

Embarrassed at this flow of words that had escaped him, Julian, glanced down and then up again, truly noticing her for the first time. She was definitely slight of build, a little shorter than Julian, with dark brown, wavy hair to her shoulders and dark eyes. Julian looked away again.

"That's alright," she said, pronouncing it "awereet." "So you must be Julian Drake, then? That Dr. Stephens talked about in assembly that time? I'm Tess, Tess Darlay. Pleased to meet ya."

Now doubly embarrassed that he had forgotten his manners, Julian looked at her directly and shook her outstretched hand.

"You're the coxswain, right? I've seen you out with the team."

"Yeah. I'm really the second string, but I get out a bit. I have the right build for it: tiny." She grinned.

After a pause, Julian said "You must think I'm nuts. I'm sorry. It's just, it was a strong feeling."

"Nah. I get premonitions and suchlike all the time. No worries." Tess paused and smiled. "But we ought to join the others, I think

we're supposed to be helping.”

“Oh, yeah, right. Of course.” Turning, he moved on into the room, trying not to feel like an idiot.

The students' immediate task was to prepare for dinner, as the board members were due to arrive soon from the tour of the campus that had followed their afternoon meeting. While Mr. Parslow busied himself in the small service kitchen with setting up what they had brought, the students were to fill water glasses, put out butter, and do anything else that needed doing. Once they had everything ready, they stood at the back of the room, awaiting the guests. At that point they had the chance to see the dessert choices, the most prominent being a magnificent chocolate bread pudding that Chef Parslow was very proud of. Julian found himself grinning at Ryan and—a little more shyly—at Tess about the dessert.

Just before six o'clock, the door opened and the various board members began filing in, talking amongst themselves. They took seats around the table, seeming to sort themselves out casually, with Dr. Stephens in the middle of one side of the square, the one face Julian knew out of twenty strangers. At first Julian was very nervous about his tasks. He had to take drink orders and bring water or tea or soda (Mr. Parslow served wine) and then one of two kinds of salad and then the choices of entrées. Back and forth from the small kitchen to the table, avoiding running into the other students serving as waiters, trying not to spill anything, trying to be attentive without being intrusive, it was all very demanding. In between trips, in whispered conversation, he learned that Tess was from Edinburgh, that she was a sophomore in her second year at St. Eligius, and that she hoped to go to “uni,” as she called it, here in the states. As the diners finished the main course and began to contemplate dessert, Julian felt more comfortable and began to study the people around the table. A few board members seemed to dominate the conversation along each side of the square. Dr. Stephens seemed deferential and polite, as did many of the others, but a few members got louder as they talked about their own days as students or about their businesses and careers. From what Julian could tell, the board contained many different kinds of people, businessmen, professors, and one or two who were headmasters of other schools.

During dessert, Julian could not help but overhear a somewhat hushed conversation between two men at the table next to his. One, a short, brown-

haired, nervous looking man, seemed to be discreetly shushing his companion, who was talking more and more loudly. The talker was the kind of person Julian had sometimes seen at his parents' dinner parties: perfectly dressed and with unruffled hair, he seemed very smooth and somehow did not fit in a school. For some reason Julian could not identify, when he looked at the man he felt a sense of hidden menace.

"Well, why not sell it?" the smooth man asked, hardly trying to keep his voice down. "We have got to start thinking strategically at this school! *If* we want the school to be here in ten years, that is. I'm tired of hearing about the heritage of the school and the land's role in the school's history."

"Well, it has been there a long time," the nervous man offered. "To sell it would alter the campus pretty fundamentally."

"Yes, and also bring the school *millions* of needed dollars. If the school isn't willing to embrace the future"--and here the man seemed to glance meaningfully at Dr. Stephens, though no one else at the table noticed --"then it won't have one, and owning a big field won't do it much good."

Julian listened in spite of himself, straining to hear when he returned to the rear of the room with empty dessert plates. He saw that others were now joining the conversation. A woman on the other side of the nervous man interjected: "But Mr. Stryker, I still don't see how selling Parker's Piece has anything to do with embracing the future. Isn't the question just one of financial expediency, of whether it is good for the school or not?"

A pit instantly appeared in Julian's stomach. He glanced around to catch Ryan's eye, but Ryan was in the kitchen. He did see Tess nearby, and walking over to her, he asked quietly if she knew who Mr. Stryker was.

"Dunno," Tess whispered. "He wasn't here the last time I did this, in October."

Julian nodded his thanks and turned his attention back to the conversation. The group must have exchanged a few more points, and the nervous man seemed intent on changing the subject. Before the conversation moved on, though, Julian did hear Mr. Stryker say: "What all of you have got to understand is that the school's future, *our* school's future"--and here he paused for emphasis and a brief smile-- "depends not on any one decision we or the Headmaster makes, but on a willingness to think differently. The world is changing. Business is the model successful schools emulate. Go to any education conference and you will hear that. We have to embrace that

future; we have to begin to think in new ways, to consider things not considered before.” Here he paused again, looking round at the three or four board members who were clearly listening to him. “That is, *if* we want the school and the students to survive and prosper.”

Julian saw all four of them nod, and he could not fight off the coldness gripping his stomach. How could anyone *think* of selling Parker’s Piece? Had they been students here? Hadn’t they seen the view this afternoon? He felt cursed. Just when he was beginning to feel at home, some connection, they wanted to sell off part of the campus?

The world seemed to whirl around him and in his distraction, he caught sight of Dr. Stephens, calmly speaking to other board members at another table. Did he know? Julian wondered. Did he support this idea? Surely not. But if he didn’t, could he stop it?

As Julian stood there, aghast, Ryan and Hieu came over. “Hey, man,” Ryan whispered. “Are you all right? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Julian looked at them and shook his head. “Later,” he whispered back. “Let’s finish clearing so we can get out of here.”

“There’s still dessert for us!” Ryan said. “I want some of that bread pudding!”

“I’m not hungry.”

Ryan looked at him as if he had suddenly grown horns and a tail.

“Well, OK. We’re almost done. And they’re leaving.” Ryan pointed to the board members who were getting up from their chairs. “Just finish with the clearing and you can get going. But I want to know what’s going on.”

Julian nodded, and then went through the rest of what needed to be done mechanically. He just couldn’t believe what he had heard, and he wanted to get as far from the room as he could.

Chapter Six: Winter Doldrums

When he left the boardroom, Julian went to the library and found himself just sitting in front of the clock, listening to its measured ticking and welcoming the feeling of respite it gave him. Respite against the feeling that, without Parker’s Piece, the school would be like a face with a front tooth missing. He couldn’t begin to understand how the board could consider this.

“Hey, Julian.” Ryan was walking through the stacks, having entered the library’s second floor from the other end. Tess and Hieu followed Ryan in. Julian was a little surprised that Ryan had brought the other two along, but they all seemed concerned.

“What’s up? Why’d ya have to skip out? We all noticed that you were really worried.”

Julian, nervous to explain himself in front of all of them, hesitated, and then pushed on, his anger driving him. “It’s Parker’s Piece.”

“What about it?” Tess asked.

“They’re talking about selling it.”

“No way!” they chorused in response.

“I heard three or four of them talking about it. Especially this one guy, Mr. Stryker. He was pushing the idea with some of the others, saying the school needed the money.”

Hieu spoke up, “But Dr. Stephens would never allow that, I know he wouldn’t.”

“Quite,” said Tess.

“Actually, the board makes those kinds of decisions, not the Headmaster.” This was from Ryan. “My dad used to be on the board, and he told me what they do. They make the big financial decisions, and they hire the Headmaster. So he has to do what they say.”

Julian spoke up. “It sounded to me like Dr. Stephens was unaware of it. And Stryker gave me the creeps. He was scary somehow, and it seemed like he didn’t like Dr. Stephens very much. He kept glaring at him like he thought he wasn’t doing a good job. He was talking about how the school needed to go in a different direction, or something.”

The room was quiet as they thought about Julian’s news. They all saw jogging through the meadow every day on the way to practice as a special ritual.

“We have to do something,” Julian said. “Parker’s Piece has been a part of the school since the beginning; can you imagine the place without it?” Julian hesitated again. “I’m just starting to feel at home here. I can’t let them destroy this place.”

“What can we do?” asked Hieu. “We’re students. We don’t have any say in stuff like this.”

“But we do!” exclaimed Tess. “This is what the newspaper’s for! We can do an editorial about this. It will make everyone argue about it, and influence opinion.”

“But it’s just a student paper,” Ryan said.

“Wheesht! Alums read it, teachers read it, board members read it. I know. I manage the subscription lists. And it's published on the website, for crying out loud! We could reach a lot of people this way.”

Julian thought about what Tess was saying. “You’re right. An editorial is a way we can get the word out. But we need to know a lot more to do it right. We need to know the history of Parker’s Piece, and what exactly they want to do with it.”

“Well, OK,” said Ryan. “But how will we find that stuff out? And how can we talk about it without admitting that you eavesdropped on a board meeting?!”

Tess, clearly taken with the idea of a heroic editorial changing campus history, said, “We cross that bridge once the piece is written. As to the first problem, we just use the school archives.”

“Where are they?” Julian asked.

“In the library. There’s a whole room devoted to school history. I’m sure Ms. Bibfeldt would be charged that someone was interested in it.”

“I think Dr. Stephens mentioned that to me, when he said he had found mention of the clock in the library.” This statement of Julian’s drew blank stares from Tess and Hieu.

“Oh, you mean the one that’s back in the library?” Tess asked.

Since Tess lived in Mcguire and Hieu lived on second, they knew nothing about the clock other than what Dr. Stephens had told the whole school. At this point in the conversation, Julian felt much more comfortable and explained that the clock was a part of the school’s history too and that Dr. Stephens was interested in it. For now he said nothing else about it, and Ryan, sensing Julian’s caution, said nothing.

“OK. So we use the archives,” Hieu said. “But how do we find out what the board may be up to?”

Ryan had the answer this time. “The full board meets every two months. But they have committees that meet more frequently. One of them’s the finance committee, and I bet this will turn up on their agenda!”

Julian surprised himself with his next statement. “We have to find a way to listen in on the next meeting.”

“Are you nuts?! That’s a one-way ticket home!” Ryan said.

“I don’t care. We have to stop this.” Julian spoke with more conviction that he had felt about anything in a very long time, perhaps ever.

Soothingly, Tess intervened. “Look, let’s get the editorial done, at least the part on the history, and Ryan and Hieu can work on a way to find out more about the board. Ryan knows how it works, and Hieu is a whiz with his Mac. Maybe he can figure out a way to listen in remotely.”

Hieu looked startled. “Well, I’ll think about it. But that’s pretty serious.”

“Couldn’t it be done, though? Ya know, using a mic and a wireless transmitter?” Julian asked.

“Yeah. I think it could. But I’m not saying I’ll do it.”

Julian understood the hesitation. “That’s OK. Just think about it for now.” He looked around at all of them. “Look, you all, I really appreciate this.”

Ryan looked reassuring. “Julian, this is our school. We don’t want this to happen. Let’s start by doing the research on Parker’s, and then we’ll go from there. Everybody agreed?”

They each agreed that they were in, and further that Julian and Tess would work on the research, while Hieu and Ryan would make a plan to learn more about the board. Then they would weigh the risks. Agreed on this, the group dispersed to go back to their dorms. Julian had heard the term “band of brothers” before. Now, even though they were plotting something risky, and even though one of the “brothers” was a sister, he was thrilled to know what it meant.

~

Before Julian and Tess could begin their work, events took a turn that made the two problems of the board’s intentions and research into Parker’s Piece run together. They also squarely connected the clock with the other events. Tess came running up to Julian at the beginning of lunch the following Monday. Julian was waiting in line at the entrance to the dining hall, but at her urging, he quickly followed Tess out of the dining hall and over towards Bowes.

“Ryan and Hieu will meet us in the library,” she said breathlessly. “You’ve got to come now.”

Reaching the first floor, they saw that Ryan and Hieu were indeed already waiting in the study room.

Julian shut the door behind them as Tess opened the screen of her laptop, which was sitting on the table. “Check this out,” she said. “The news about the board plans is coming out!”

As the screen came to life, the others crowded around to see that the machine held proofs for stories from the upcoming edition of the school paper. The story she pointed to had the bold headline “Board Discusses Sale of Parker’s Piece: Direction of School Questioned.” “It tells it all right here: ‘at this past weekend’s meeting of the Board of Governors, Mr. Stryker, a newly appointed board member, proposed a plan to sell Parker’s Piece, which would net the school twenty million dollars of needed endowment.’ Apparently the board met again on Saturday, and this all came out. It says ‘the discussion by the board was heated, with proponents upholding both positions. The Headmaster, Dr. Stephens, would only say that he was working with the board to support the best interests of the school, which he was sure would win out. The matter has been referred to the Finance Committee of the Board to discuss in more depth. In the meantime, faculty and students who wish to voice opinions on the issue should contact Ms. Cavanaugh, chair of the Finance Committee.’ That makes it sound like Dr. Stephens is being railroaded.”

“I bet that committee will be meeting soon. We’ve got to figure out what’s going on and how to stop it,” Julian said. Then he noticed the other headlines in the proof. One, over an editorial, said: “Are We Charting the Course? Board Discussion Raises Leadership Questions.”

Gulping, Julian asked “What’s this? Is the paper questioning Dr. Stephen’s leadership?”

Tess replied, “That’s by old Ackermann. She’s the sponsor, and she just loves to have her say. It’s no secret she hates Dr. Stephens. Supposedly she was passed over for being a department chair. Let’s see, what does it say? Quite. I’ve heard her hawing on about this in newspaper meetings, about how the school needs new direction, and that we need to operate more like a business. I reckon that means selling land to make money.”

“But that’s just how that Stryker guy was talking in the meeting!” Julian exclaimed. “Ackermann is supporting him against Dr. Stephens! We’ve got to get to the bottom of this.”

Turning to Hieu and Ryan, he said, “You guys figure out when the committee meets next and how to listen in. Tess and I will get going on the research. We only have a little time before break.”

Looking at each other, they all nodded silently, except Tess, who said “quite right” before they all filed out to grab lunch.

~

Julian and Tess agreed to meet in the library the next evening. Since his grades had improved lately, Julian wouldn’t have to attend study hall. Julian was afraid the time would drag slowly before they could get to work, but between classes, practice, and homework (including a nasty chemistry test involving electron covalence), the time actually passed quickly. The two met in the lobby as quickly as they could after dinner and were relieved to see that Mrs. Bibfeldt was still there. Some days she went home at the end of athletics, but tonight was a duty night for her, so she would be on campus until 10:00. Julian knew that they would need her assistance to use the archives.

With their laptops in hand they approached the circulation desk. I don’t know why, thought Julian, people are always afraid of librarians. He had always liked the librarians at the public library at home, and Mrs. Bibfeldt was certainly pleasant. She was usually so pleased at student interest that she was happy to help. She looked up and smiled at their approach, the wrinkles on her face seeming fixed in permanent smile lines, her short gray hair framing a face on which she perched gold wire-framed glasses.

“Mrs. Bibfeldt . . . we were wondering if you could help us use the archives,” said Tess.

“We want to research the history of St. Eligius, and especially Parker’s Piece,” Julian added.

She looked shrewdly at them. “So you’ve heard about that, hmm? I can’t say I was pleased to hear that the board is discussing it. Still, I am glad to see some students taking active interest in their school. Things are quiet now; we can go right up.”

She turned and grabbed a large key ring with a few keys from a peg behind the counter and led them across the first floor and up the stairs. They entered the second floor at the end opposite where the clock sat in its alcove. The archives were located in a small room on the left. Squinting, Mrs. Bibfeldt jiggled the key into the lock and then finally turned the knob and opened the door. Fumbling absently for a light switch, she found it and flipped the light on. Her apologies for her slowness (“I need to get up here more often and get things straight . . .”) were cut short by her gasp as the light flooded the room.

It was a total mess. Books had been pulled from shelves and thrown to the floor. Boxes of clippings, pamphlets, and brochures were dumped out everywhere. There wasn’t a surface on the floor, table, and chairs that was not covered with materials from the archives.

“Oh, my goodness! What has happened? I was just in here last week to drop off something and things were fine. Who could have done this? How?”

Julian looked slowly around, the pit in his stomach returning with force. “Is that key always hanging on the ring behind your desk, Mrs. Bibfeldt?”

“Yes, it is. I know it’s not terribly secure, but really, who would want to break into the archives? It’s the *archives*.”

“Somebody. You say you were here last week?” Julian and Tess looked at each other. Could it be a coincidence that the board had met this past weekend and now this had happened?

“Yes, I was in the room Wednesday or Thursday, and no one has been in since. At least,” and she frowned ruefully, “no one who is *supposed* to be in here.”

“How can we tell if something’s missing?” Tess asked.

“Well, I know pretty well what’s here, and there is also a catalog here somewhere that I try to keep up to date.”

Mrs. Bibfeldt began to search around the room, leafing through the disarrayed stacks and looking in boxes. Tess and Julian tried to help but weren’t sure what to look for. Finally, beneath a pile of old letters, she unearthed a large, very dusty, blue three-ring binder. Clearing some space on the table, she set it down and opened it. Tess and Julian crowded around to look. There, in typewritten pages that abruptly changed to word-

processed text, was a list, apparently of everything in the archives, from commencement programs dated 1922 to the original deeds of the school's property to publications by various faculty members. The list went back a long way, successive librarians having maintained it through the years.

"Now, you said you wanted to find information on the history of the school, and on Parker's Piece in particular." Mrs. Bibfeldt began flipping pages, skimming the entries. "Well, the standby is *St. Eligius Episcopal School: a Short History*, written back in the 60s. It's here somewhere. There's also information on the original land acquisitions from the diocese, back around 1910 or so. Ah, here it is," she said, flipping another page. "'Packet: deeds and ownership, Parker's Piece.' It says it's on shelf 5A, and the *Short History* is on 6B. We'll have to look through a lot, I'm afraid."

The three of them began digging through the disheveled piles. Privately, Tess and Julian wondered if it was hopeless, but they pitched in. After a few minutes, they realized that this approach *was* hopeless.

Julian said, "What if two of us pick up material and call out what it is, and one of us finds it in the directory, and calls out the shelf, and then we can put things back and hopefully find what we want at the same time?"

"Bless you, Julian," said Mrs. Bibfeldt. "That would save me a ton of work, if you don't mind!"

Tess smiled and said, "Quite. Let's get on with it," and they dug in. Taking turns sifting and reading the directory, they proceeded through what seemed like tons of old programs, books and articles by masters, old report cards donated by alums, and lots of other junk.

Julian couldn't help getting sidetracked by some of the things he found. "Hey, did you know that in 1943, the entire senior class signed up for service in the war? And that in 1969, only 10 out of 60 did?"

"Fascinating, Julian," smirked Tess.

Eventually, when it was almost time to get back to dorm, they realized that they were pretty much done, and the two documents they sought were missing. Almost everything was back on the shelves, and there was no *Short History* to be found, and no documents relating to Parker's Piece. The leaden feeling in Julian's stomach, abated by the distraction of helping Mrs. Bibfeldt, returned with a vengeance. Everything they were looking for was gone!

"This can't be a coincidence!" Tess said as she placed a last file on a shelf and wiped her dusty hands on her jeans. "I'm thinking somebody

doesn't want anyone to know the history behind Parker's Piece. Somebody's nicked it."

"Do you really think that's true?" said Mrs. Bibfeldt. "I thought maybe this was just a prank. But to think someone actually stole something is terrible!"

"It certainly looks that way," Julian said. Standing at the directory, Julian paused, and gasped aloud.

"What is it?" Tess asked.

For a moment, Julian couldn't find words. "There's something else missing, something even more important."

"What?" Tess asked. "What could be more important?"

Julian was looking down at an entry, dated 1975, which said simply, "Personal journal, Latin, circa 1925, by E. Drake, former history master."

"My great-grandfather's journal, his journal from when he was here, when he gave the clock to the school, used to be in this room."

~

Mrs. Bibfeldt stared up at Julian from where she had squatted awkwardly to wedge a thick collection of letters onto a lower shelf. "Your great-grandfather's journal? I've actually been meaning to mention it to you, ever since Dr. Stephens put the clock back in here."

"He really kept a journal? It's here?!"

"Well, it *was* here. It was an old leather bound journal, the kind that used to be very common before computers, when people actually wrote by hand. It was apparently some kind of account of his time at St. E's. But I never really read it." Here the old librarian grinned sheepishly. "It was entirely in Latin, and my Latin has always been bad. I learned it in school, of course, enough to read titles and the like, but I never took to it. Dr. Drake, though, was a real scholar and kept all of his private writings in Latin, I believe."

Julian suddenly had a premonition. If the school history was gone, and the documents related to Parker's Piece, and Dr. Drake's journal, what about . . . ? He raced out of the room, leaving Tess and Mrs. Bibfeldt mystified. He ran down the passageway between one of the balcony railings and the overflowing stacks, fetching up in front of the shelves where the clock stood.

At first glance, it seemed fine. But looking closer, Julian realized that not only was it not ticking, but that marks in the dust on it showed that it had been handled. He realized with a start that the pendulum was missing. As Tess and Mrs. Bibfeldt approached, Julian opened the glass door, to see that someone had unhooked the pendulum and taken it, as well as the key to wind the clock. Why whoever it was had not just taken or destroyed the clock itself he couldn't understand, but they certainly had made sure that it would no longer run.

"They're gone, the pendulum and the key! Somebody doesn't want the clock to run, just like they don't want us to know anything more about Parker's Piece or my great-grandfather."

Tess had a puzzled look on her face. "Why would somebody shut down the clock? What's it have to do with anything?"

Julian didn't answer.

"This is very strange," said Mrs. Bibfeldt. "I will certainly inform Mr. Perry and Dr. Stephens of these events, and they will get to the bottom of it."

"Yeah, sure," Julian mumbled.

She paused, as if uncertain to say more. "Julian, I don't know if it's important, but I do know that one thing mentioned in the school history was Dr. Drake and this clock. He apparently insisted on the clock being here in the library. Others on the faculty at the time thought he was a bit mad about it. Yes, it seemed a nice gift and all, but he seemed overly insistent that it be in this building. Then, when he left the school in 1925, he took it with him."

"That's a bit mad," said Tess. "I wonder why it had to be in this building?"

"There's nothing special about this building . . ." Julian said, watching Mrs. Bibfeldt frown.

She cleared her throat. "Except that it is at the heart of the school. Without a good library, a school is nothing!"

"Yeah, you're right, Mrs. Bibfeldt. Sorry."

He and Tess then told Mrs. Bibfeldt that they needed to get back to dorm and left for the stairs, her thanks for their help in their ears. Julian had just one thought in his mind: they had to find that journal. In the 1920s, when the school was just beginning, Dr. Drake had wanted a very peculiar clock at the heart of the campus. Today someone was out to change St. E's fundamentally with the sale of Parker's Piece, and clearly that someone saw

the clock as somehow getting in the way. They had to find that journal. It held the key to the whole mystery.

~

The mystery didn't get any clearer when the newspaper was actually published the next day, Wednesday. Tess had already read all the proofs, but for Julian, Hieu, and Ryan, Wednesday after lunch was the first chance they had to see the complete paper. Mrs. Ackermann's editorial in particular made Julian angry. The four were sitting around a table inside the dining hall, discussing the paper. Julian looked up from his copy to say, disgust in his voice, "Not only does Ackermann say that the sale should be approved, but then she goes on to say that the clock is an example of what is wrong with Dr. Stephens' leadership, that he is 'more worried about old clocks than about ensuring the school has resources to purchase new technologies' and that 'he is perpetuating the past instead of looking to the future.'"

"That's stupid," Ryan said. "We have plenty of computers. Jeesh! Every student has a laptop, and a lot have tablets and phones."

"It's just Ackermann's way of downing Dr. Stephens," Tess said. "If you really know what's going on, you know it's not true. But if you don't, it sounds like he's doing something wrong."

"Well, she can say what she wants, I guess. But if she's the one who ransacked the archives and stole the pendulum, then she's our enemy," Julian said.

"Julian, tell me about this clock. Why's it so important?" Tess asked. "I heard what you said yesterday in the library, but it seems a bit dodgy. Tell us the deal."

Hieu chimed in as well, "Yeah, tell us about the clock. Obviously it *is* important. But why?"

Julian looked at his three friends and saw Ryan nod encouragingly at him. So he took the plunge and told them about his bringing the clock back and why, and how it made him feel.

"I didn't feel anything wonky yesterday," Tess said.

"That's because it wasn't running. The thing is, up 'til now I thought that the clock was just something that made me feel better, but now I think

it's more than that. I mean, it must be, if whoever damaged it also took my great-grandfather's journal."

"Whatdya mean?" Ryan asked.

"Somehow, whoever this is--and I bet it's Stryker, in league with Ackermann--thinks the clock is a threat to his plans to sell Parker's Piece. Why else would he take the journal and shut down the clock?"

"Why the journal? What could that have to do with Parker's Piece?" Tess asked.

"I'm not sure, other than I think it must talk about how the clock works and what it does. We've got to find the journal, and get the clock pieces back. Somehow, it'll help stop what's happening."

~

Julian had read about what sailors in the age of sail called the "doldrums." Apparently in some parts of the ocean, ships could get stuck in regions where there was absolutely no wind, sometimes for weeks. That could lead to sailors going mad or even dying if supplies ran out. While the situation wasn't that dire, Julian found having to go home for Winter Break at the end of the week to be maddening. It called a halt to their progress, just when it seemed vitally important to be working together towards their goal of finding out what was going on. And the events of the break—his father's remarriage—instead of just being difficult, were a huge distraction from what Julian found that he actually cared about. Not that he wasn't happy, at some level, for his father. But the school, his new friends, the clock, and the legacy of his great-grandfather: all of these seemed far more important. Julian and Tess did use part of the break to write a draft of their editorial, exchanging versions online. Though they had to write it without any special knowledge of the school's history, they could now take the opportunity to mention the recent events in the archives and connect them with the proposed sale of Parker's Piece. But they couldn't really finish without Hieu and Ryan, and they certainly couldn't publish it. Grinning at himself because of the irony, Julian found that he could not wait to return to St. Eligius.

Chapter Seven: Discoveries

Back at school in early January, Julian and Tess spent parts of the first Saturday and Sunday in the library workroom, putting the finishing touches on their editorial. Late on Sunday afternoon, Ryan and Hieu found them, just as Tess finished the second draft. She clicked “save” with a flourish and grinned wickedly. Looking over her shoulder, Ryan read through the text, scrolling for a while until he whistled.

“Well, *that’s* going to piss somebody off!”

“What? You mean make them mad?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Why?”

“Oh, maybe where you say, ‘We can only conclude that the heinous ransacking of the school archives before Christmas as well as the wanton vandalizing of the Drake clock were committed by those who wish to see the sale of Parker’s Piece. If this is how they show their love of the school, doubtless the sale of the land enjoyed by generations of students will show it even further.’”

Julian grinned too. “Well, it’s true! Whoever did it deserves everything we said.”

The others grinned in return, and then they had to get to dinner and their homework.

~

The next morning, Julian left first bell class a little early so he could arrive early to chapel. He had somewhat grudgingly agreed to serve as an acolyte for morning prayer this week. Ms. Sayer was of medium height, with close-trimmed brown hair and half-glasses that she had a disconcerting habit of looking over. In her priest’s robes, she was imposing, but she seemed quite nice the few times Julian had spoken with her. After her request to help, he met Ms. Sayer at 10:15, and she showed him where the cassocks and surplices hung in the narrow sacristy, through a doorway from the choir. She helped him pick out a red cassock that was about the right length, and then left him to put it on and pick out a white surplice to go over it. It was a

struggle in the small room. The sacristy was where the chaplain kept the vessels for communion, along with extra prayer books, hymnals, and of course the robes. As Julian fought to fish his head through the surplice, he staggered a bit and knocked against the leaning piles of prayer books and hymnals stacked below the one window. Dusty books scattered to the floor and finally emerging from the surplice, Julian bent down to gather the spilt books. As he did so, his breath caught. There, between the blue binding of a hymnal and the dark red of a prayer book, he saw an old leather binding.

“Are you all right in there?” Ms. Sayer’s voice came in from the choir.

“Uh, yeah, I’m fine. I’ll be right out.”

Gently, Julian pulled the hymnal aside and picked up the old, leather-bound book. It was, Julian knew, a duodecimo volume, a little bigger than a paperback book, with a reddish-brown leather cover beginning to crumble. Turning to the second parchment-like page, he saw narrow handwriting in a copper-colored ink, somewhat faded. The writing was unmistakably Latin. He couldn’t make out anything but a word here and there, never having studied Latin. But he knew the name on that initial page of writing: “Ernest L. Drake, D. Phil.” His heart pounding with excitement, he looked around frantically for somewhere to put the journal, where it would be safe until the end of the service. Then, with a grin, he realized that it couldn’t be any safer than where he’d found it, so he restacked the fallen books, placing the journal in the middle. Then he resettled his robes and hurried out to listen to Ms. Sayer’s instructions.

Though the service was only twenty minutes, really just a few prayers, a reading, and a short sermon that Ms. Sayer jokingly referred to as a “homilette,” to Julian it seemed to last even longer than usual. After the dismissal and benediction, Julian had to wait impatiently as the school community filed out past him and Ms. Sayer, shaking hands and saying their good mornings. He had a hard time looking Mrs. Ackermann in the eye, and he strained to see any tension on Dr. Stephens’ face, but all he saw was his usual sincere interest in others. When the last person had departed, Julian raced as fast as dignity and robes would allow back to the sacristy. Once there he pulled off his robes, hung them up, and then gently removed the journal from the stacked books. He had only five minutes until class began, not much time to decide what to do with the journal. The other

problem was the language. How would he read it? He couldn't possibly learn Latin fast enough to do him any good.

Ms. Sayer appeared in the doorway, her own robes over her arm. "Everything OK?" she asked.

"Um. Yeah. No. Well . . ."

Ms. Sayer raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

"Ms. Sayer, did Dr. Stephens ask you to look into my great-grandfather's clock? He said he was going to."

She looked at him appraisingly for a moment. "Well, actually he did. But I must confess that I haven't done so. Now it seems like I really should, doesn't it?"

"Uh, I just found Dr. Drake's missing journal. It was listed in the archives catalog, but someone took it when they took the school history and the other stuff and . . ." here Julian paused. ". . . and when they busted the clock."

Ms. Sayer looked at him, somehow putting support into her glance.

Julian went on, "I know it's really important, the journal and the clock. I think the clock's connected to the proposal to sell Parker's Piece. I think the journal might say why, but it's, it's . . . I can't read it."

"Why not?"

"It's in Latin." Seized suddenly by inspiration, Julian continued, "You're a priest, *you* must know Latin. You could read it!"

"Don't assume that the priesthood requires Latin these days! But yes, I happen to be fluent. It has more to do with a good independent school education than the priesthood."

"Would you read it for me? Tell me what it says? Only, only it would have to be confidential, you know, it's kinda private."

"Well, since it was in the archives, I don't know how private it is. It must have been donated by your grandfather when Dr. Drake died. Probably no one has read it in years. But I understand what you mean. Yes, Julian, I will read through it, and see what I find."

"Thanks, Ms. Sayer. When, uh, when do you think . . ." Julian trailed off.

"I think I could manage it by the weekend," Ms. Sayer said with a smile. "It'll help me keep in practice. Now, you'd better get to class."

“Right,” Julian said happily. He handed over the journal, started to ask her to be careful with it, realized that she would implicitly, and then dashed out of the chapel to Ms. Paulette’s English class.

~

That week was without question the longest in Julian’s life. He had a history paper to start on (on the role of Asia Minor in East-West relations) and that kept him in the library for several evenings. And there was the usual round of crew (mostly just running now that winter had fully arrived) and classes. Nonetheless the week dragged, and each time he saw Ms. Sayer, he looked at her, hoping for a sign that she had something for him. Ryan, Tess, and Hieu had at first been excited to hear of Julian’s discovery. But though they speculated as to why the thief had hidden the journal rather than destroying it, they grew tired of Julian’s heightened sense of expectation and told him to cool it.

Finally on Friday morning, as Julian was leaving chapel, Ms. Sayer stopped him and asked him to come by her office after school. As soon as the final class ended—first draft of history paper turned in, thank you very much--Julian made his way to the Chaplain’s office. While most masters used their classrooms as offices, and the administrators all had offices in the Admin building, Ms. Sayer had an office in the chapel, in a lofty room on the other side of the choir from the sacristy. He knocked on the outside door and entered when Ms. Sayer called. Looking over her glasses, she smiled when she saw him, and said, “You know it’s still Lab, don’t you?”

Seeing the crushed look on Julian’s face, as he realized he would have to wait until the daily departmental lab or help time was over, she waved him in. “Since it’s Friday, I don’t think I’ll have many supplicants. Somehow theology is always at the bottom of the list anyway.”

Julian had never been to her office before, and looked around nervously. Since it was a part of the chapel, the room had a lofty ceiling, with walls covered in bookshelves. Julian did notice that though the shelves held many volumes, pictures and knickknacks broke up the books, giving the dark room a more human air. In the middle of the room a large coffee table sat between a sofa on one side and two comfortable looking armchairs on the other. On the table were things that looked like toys: one was one of those

plastic frames that held many thin metal pins, which you could push back and forth, leaving the impression of your hand (or your face) in the pins. It was, Julian thought, a fidgeter's heaven, which was probably the intention.

"Can I get you a drink, Julian?" Ms. Sayer asked.

"Uh, sure. Thanks."

"I've just made a pot of tea."

"I've never had anything but iced tea, but I'll try it."

Ms. Sayer frowned slightly. "I learned to drink tea in college, when I spent a year in Britain. It's slightly depressing that the habit has never caught on here. It's a calming ritual to make tea."

Not sure what to say to this, Julian watched as the chaplain removed a hideous tea cozy from the brown, chipped teapot on her desk and slowly poured out tea into two china cups. She reached over and opened a small refrigerator next to her desk, removed a small carton of cream, and poured a bit into each cup.

"Sugar?" she asked.

"Uh, sure."

Spooning some light brown, large-grained sugar into each cup, she stirred them and then handed one of the cups to Julian. Noticing his restrained impatience, she took a sip from her tea, and then said, "Let's get right to it, shall we?" Setting her teacup aside, she bent over her desk to gingerly touch the old, worn leather binding of Dr. Drake's journal. "I've been reading this journal pretty carefully, since you so kindly lent it to me. I think it's pretty important, both for understanding what's been happening on campus lately, and for understanding what you--and I--have experienced."

Julian stared. "You mean you know about . . . how . . ."

"Dr. Stephens did ask me to look into the nature of the clock. When he asked me, he told me how the clock made you feel, and though I did nothing else, I did go over to the library and look at the clock. I believe that I felt the same thing you did: a profound sense of calm, of peace, of imperturbability, right?"

Julian nodded, frowning. "But I don't understand how it works, or what my great-grandfather was trying to do with the clock. I mean, I know he wanted the clock on campus, but where'd he get it? How does it work? And why? It's pretty weird . . . I don't believe in magic. At least, I never have before. Science explains things pretty well. But this seems like magic."

The chaplain responded: “Well, what do you make of the clock and how it makes you feel?”

“I can’t explain it. I really can’t. No idea. I know the feeling I get is real, though, since others can feel it too.”

She paused and looked intently at Julian before going on.

“I have to say, if I hadn’t experienced the same powerful feeling in the clock’s presence, I wouldn’t believe it. But I can’t deny my own experience. And there is nothing wrong with it, nothing irreligious about the experience or about your grandfather’s writing. He seems to have been a very intelligent and learned man. His writing is pretty hard to follow, but ultimately it reveals a pretty reverent point of view. Where it really gets interesting is the magic.”

Julian looked intently at her. “So you do think it’s magic?”

Ms. Sayer paused, seeming to consider how much Julian could take. “Maybe it would be easier if I tried to put it in my own words. Would that be OK?”

Julian shrugged. “Yeah, OK.” He took his first sip of tea and gasped at how hot it was. Pleasantly sweet, but hot.

“All right.” Ms. Sayer took a long sip from her drink and seemed to compose herself. “Now, to understand Dr. Drake’s thinking, it’s helpful to think about this question: Why do you get out of bed in the morning?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Just that: why do you get out of bed in the morning? And I don’t mean, what wakes you up. I’m not talking about your alarm.”

“Well . . . because I have to, I guess. I mean, we have to get up, to be in class, you know.” Julian grinned a little sheepishly.

“*Touché*. Fair enough. But is that really *why* you get up each day? Is what motivates you simply the expectations of others?”

Julian shrugged, “Some days it is.”

“Sure. All of us feel that way sometimes. But your great-grandfather would argue that it’s more than that. He’d say that we get up, and we do things, because of a conviction we have that life is worth living, that things we can do and achieve are valuable and mean something. It’s another way of saying that life has meaning.”

“But who knows what the meaning of life is? Jeesh, it could be anything. And isn’t it different for different people?”

Ms. Sayer smiled. “Old Dr. Drake wasn’t trying to dictate the specific meaning of life for you, but he did believe—quite passionately, I gather—that life in general is meaningful. He taught here at St. Eligius at a time when it was fashionable to be agnostic—to say that one does not know if God exists—but he believed that life holds meaning because what he called the “Inner Unity” or “the One,” something like what we mean when we use the word “God,” does exist.”

She paused again before continuing, ignoring Julian’s obvious impatience. “That’s part of the reason he ended up leaving St. E’s. He was one of the founding masters, the history department chair. He was apparently the one who picked St. Eligius as the school’s saint, and now that we have the clock on campus again, and now that I have read the journal, I can see why, since St. Eligius is the patron saint of watchmakers.”

“So why’d he leave?” Julian asked.

“Well, as I said, it was quite fashionable in the 1920s to be agnostic, or even atheist, and I gather that many of the early masters had that bent. Some of them were very keen on pursuing fads in education, to make changes that Dr. Drake disagreed with. From the sounds of his thoughts on it in the journal, he may have been a bit overboard there (I do think teachers need a good kick in the pants every generation or so!), but his real reason for leaving was that for a while there the Episcopal nature of the school was in real debate, and he did not want to teach at a school where agnosticism was openly taught to the students. He didn’t seem to be opposed at all to critical thinking or questions, but he wanted students to be confronted with a range of facts and choices. He wanted them to be able to reflect honestly on their own experiences and decide, rather than simply be told that theism was not a possibility, as some of his colleagues were doing. So he ended up leaving, and taking his clock with him. It’s quite sad really, especially when we know the subsequent history, that moderation prevailed and the school evolved into what it is today, an Episcopal school, yes, but a place that encourages free thought and open questions.”

Somewhat impatiently, Julian asked: “But what does this have to do with the clock?”

“Have patience, young *Padawan*. I’m getting there. Dr. Drake believed that life has meaning, that there is worth in getting out of bed every day and doing things. He thought that achieving intellectually or artistically or

athletically—being creative—is valuable, a meaningful thing, worth doing. He thought the same about having good relationships with others. He thought that we find meaning in these ways, by creating and by loving and by appreciating the creativity of others. Now where the clock comes in has to do with *why* he thought this was the case. Why does creating—writing well or acting or singing or rowing a crew shell just right—and relating—loving and helping others—bring meaning to our lives?”

Almost interrupting, Julian said, “Wait a minute. He thought writing an *English paper* could be the meaning of life?”

“No, not in itself. But he would have said it could be a *meaningful* activity. But my question was why do these types of things bring meaning to our lives? He would have said that all those things can be meaningful because they involve *self-transcendence*.”

Ms. Sayer grinned at Julian’s blank stare before going on: “What’s the feeling you get when you get intensely involved with something you love to do?”

“Well, when I write code—you know, computers—I get pretty absorbed. Sometimes I don’t notice things around me, and I end up being late for things or not doing my homework.”

“Ah,” said the chaplain, seemingly satisfied. “Dr. Drake would say that you get that way because in the creative process you have transcended yourself. You lose track of time and your surroundings because, for a short period, you have lost or gone beyond yourself. You’re ‘in the groove’ and don’t even notice yourself. He thought the same kind of thing happens through love as well; when we truly love someone, we lose sight of ourselves and our own importance.”

“But how can that be? When I code, I’m still there. . . .” Ms. Sayer stared at Julian while he thought about this. Julian went on: “I guess you mean that I’m just not aware of myself and my problems.”

“Exactly! In that moment you lose awareness of yourself because you are fully aware of the other or the object. In fact, in those moments, rare as they are, you overcome the division between the subject and the object that usually characterizes our existence. And he believed that each individual finds meaning in those moments of self-transcendence. So much of life just goes by and vanishes, is transient. The things of value, the lasting meaning, we find only in creation and relation. It’s really a very old religious idea,

present for instance in the gospels, kind of recast in a philosophical way. Does it make sense?”

“Yeah, kinda. I think I see what you mean. It’s supposed to be ironic, right? We find meaning in our lives by seeing beyond ourselves. OK. But what about the clock?”

“Well, he made the clock to be a kind of conduit for that meaning. We need to understand just a little more for that to make sense.”

“All right.”

“I think Dr. Drake asked what made it possible for self-transcendence to bring meaning. And he concluded that for meaning to be a reality in our lives, the universe we live in must be a meaningful place; that life itself has a meaning that transcends life, which we only find when we transcend ourselves. And that could only come from something at least partially beyond the individual parts of the universe.”

“Whatd’ya mean? Like God?”

“God. Or, at least, what he called the Inner Unity or the One.”

Julian looked earnest now. “But I can’t see him being some kind of fanatic.”

“He wasn’t! What makes you think belief in God equals fanaticism?!”

“Well, there’s so much bad stuff in history due to religion, and those whacked guys on TV.”

“That’s right, you love history, don’t you? Well, don’t you mean there’s so much bad stuff—evil—in history due to human beings?”

“Well, yeah, I guess. I guess you’re right—you can’t just blame religion for what people do. But still, it seems like an awful lot of evil has happened in the name of religion.”

“As it has in the name of countries. Do you suggest that we abandon the concept of the nation because of that?”

“Well, no, I guess not.”

“OK. Now that *that* is settled! So Dr. Drake basically thought that the meaning in our lives, the worth and value we find in creating, in loving, in caring, all that finds an explanation only in the existence of some lasting or eternal something that is at least partially beyond the everyday world. Why do people willingly give their lives for those they care about if there is no lasting meaning in it? Why do we pour our hearts—our souls—into creating something, unless the meaning found through doing so transcends what we

create, transcends even death? Because if it doesn't transcend death, then the significance of what we do ends with the thing we make or the person we love, period. He believed that meaning is greater than that, and his explanation of where that lasting meaning comes from was what he called the Inner Unity or the One. When we transcend ourselves, we overcome the division between ourselves and what we create, or between ourselves and others. We find unity, the connection between all things. But he thought this unity was eternal. It exists as an eternal source of meaning for the universe. He thought this unity is the good and the source of being, that which gives the universe order and purpose and thus makes our own experience of lasting meaning possible and real.

Another way to think about it is to think that everything that exists has some connection with everything else, is a part of something larger that connects everything. And while no one individual thing lasts, the union of everything does; it is the one thing that is eternal. When we transcend ourselves in love or creativity, we overcome the divisions in our existence and find that lasting inner unity, and so we find lasting meaning. That's why it feels worthwhile and meaningful. It is literally "full of meaning" in a way that our other, isolated experiences are not. So God, he thought, can't be proven to exist by the many arguments that people have made in history, but God *can* be shown to exist by reflecting on our own experience of profound and lasting meaning." Ms. Sayer paused, and then said, "Really, it's a pretty good argument." She sat back in a satisfied way, as if impressed with a well-delivered sermon.

"Well, I guess that makes sense," Julian said. "I mean, it's the best explanation anyone's ever given me for why God exists, much better than 'because the bible says so.' But I still don't see what it has to do with the clock."

"Well, as I said, he enchanted the clock to be a kind of conduit of the peace that finding meaning and connection brings. He believed that God not only is the source of meaning in our lives, but that God and the universe need each other, are intertwined in a way. The universe depends on God for its existence, but God needs the universe to be completed. To put it another way, God alone is kind of abstract, like an idea. God is eternal, always present. But with the individual existences of people and things in the

universe, God becomes more manifest. It's when we find meaning that we are, in a sense, making God complete."

Seeing Julian looking a little confused, Ms. Sayer went on: "Let me try that again using more of Dr. Drake's language, rather than my own. The Inner Unity is not complete without that plurality of parts, and each part needs the Unity to become all that it can. Or to put it yet another way, the One is not complete without the many, and the many need the One to be complete, to be whole. When we love, when we create, we are breaking down the barriers between parts, we are finding that Inner Unity, and we are making its oneness more real in our world, and that brings meaning. And that, in turn, gives us a good feeling, one of connection to a larger whole, one of peace. He enchanted the clock to convey that feeling, to convey the reality of God, the reality of the inner unity of all things that transcends the divisions between us. The peace it brings, the sense of depth and rootedness, is conveying the reality of our connection with the eternal, of the fact that we are at home in the universe. If I understand all this correctly, the clock's kind of like a talisman, like the Holy Grail of King Arthur."

"Wait, wait. You mean he was some kind of wizard? *Dr. Drake* enchanted the clock?!"

"Yes. There is more in his journal than just the clock. There is a whole understanding of magic based on his point of view."

Julian looked to see if Ms. Sayer, the chaplain and one of the most respected figures on campus, was joking. She didn't seem to be. "Do you really believe it?"

"Well, let me explain the rest of what's in the journal. It's certainly rational. And we've both experienced the clock and what it does. It starts to add up. It's worth being very clear about something. Dr. Drake wasn't suggesting that science is incorrect. He seems to be saying that in certain *limited* circumstances, the laws of nature that science reveals and depends upon are suspended."

Julian's face held an expression of skepticism. But it mellowed when he thought again of the feeling the clock created. There was certainly no scientific explanation there. And what Ms. Sayer was saying about the clock rung very true. "Tell me more," he said quietly.

"Dr. Drake believed that in that moment of self-transcendence, you are essentially experiencing the divine and eternal. In that moment, you lose

yourself, and you lose the division between yourself and the object you are creating, or the person you love. That's why you are so wrapped up in the creative process. That loss of division, the loss of what philosophers call subject-object duality, is an experience of God, who by definition is the One, the absolute good, the eternal source of the being of all things, who transcends time and space and the separation of oneness into the manyness of the universe as we know it.

"It's out of this that he came to believe that magic is possible. He seemed to think that it is possible to make the underlying interconnection of all reality manifest. In other words, in certain limited circumstances, it is possible to use magic to transcend the limitations of time and space. The natural laws of science, though they reign most of the time, sometimes can be violated."

"Why do you keep saying 'in certain limited circumstances'? What does that mean?"

"Well, two things, I think. Since he thought that reality consists of both unity—the One or God—and the plurality of everything else, the limitations of our existence can only be transcended temporarily. Otherwise, the distinction between God and creatures, between the absolute and the relative, would dissolve, and there would be no point to any individual existence. In other words, if magic operated all the time, then there would be no difference between creatures and God, and in the way he saw things, individual existence has a purpose: completing the divine. The other limitation is that "good" magic only works when a person is surrendering the self in the process. One can't use it for gain, or at least, one can't use it for personal gain and be undamaged by it."

"Undamaged?"

"Well, the kind of magic he is talking about, and used to enchant the clock, is good. What the clock does is manifest the peace that our connection with the eternal brings, when we realize it. It's a peace that we only can find permanently through putting others first, through transcending the self. But evil magic is also possible, though not without cost to the user."

By this point in the conversation, Julian was on the edge of his chair. His skepticism had become fascination. "Do you mean black magic?" he said.

“Well, if you mean roosters and black cats, then no. But if you mean enhancing natural powers for evil ends, then yes. Essentially evil magic is the inverse of good. Evil, in Dr. Drake’s view (which he borrowed from St. Augustine) doesn’t exist except as a corruption of the good. Evil comes about when goodness falls, when it makes choices that seek power for itself rather than interconnection and self-transcendence. In other words, evil grows like a cancer, like a mutation, when we choose to put ourselves first, to not transcend ourselves, to be independent of the One and thus ultimately alone. Thus evil, though powerful, is ultimately empty, it is nothingness, an abyss, the power of that which is not except as a corruption of what once was good.

“Evil magic makes manifest the reality of *denying* the underlying connection of all things. Rather than allow the individual to temporarily transcend the laws of space and time, it only feeds a person’s greed and desire for power. Thus it can give power, power to supernaturally control and to hurt others, for it unlocks the power of “non-being,” the threat of the nothingness that isolation truly is. But in the end its power is empty and destructive because it devours the person who attempts to use it, because she is unleashing pure nothingness.”

Ms. Sayer paused. “I think,” she said, looking closely at Julian over her steaming teacup, “that this possibility is why Dr. Drake thought it was so important to have the clock here at St. E’s and why someone has disabled its power.”

Julian was again on the edge of his seat, listening.

“It’s clear from the journal that Dr. Drake put the clock here because its nature as a conduit of the eternal served to protect the campus from the senseless, and ultimately evil, desire for power and the inevitable corruption that comes with it. The clock has a pendulum, but it *itself* is a pendulum, tying this place to the rhythm of the eternal. It makes you realize that you are not in control of the universe, and can be at home in it, wherever you are. By its very nature, the clock’s magic resists the temptation of power to change and corrupt and control what is around it. Thus it protects the campus by giving us a sense of peace and restraining the desire to control which ultimately leads to corruption.”

Julian was listening, his eyes wide. “That means that Stryker wants the clock destroyed because his plot to sell off Parker’s Piece will be blocked as long as the clock is here and running. It would be much harder to persuade

people of the need to sell off the land with the clock's magic ticking away at the heart of campus.”

“It looks that way.”

“Why didn't he destroy the clock and the journal? Why just stop it and hide the journal?”

“Well, first of all, you don't know that Mr. Stryker did those things--” Julian interrupted this with a snort.

“--*and* it may be that your great-grandfather's enchantments protect both the clock and the journal, so they can't be destroyed, at least not easily. From what I have read, that would be possible.”

Julian was quiet for a while, thinking about all that the chaplain had said. She left him in silence. Eventually, he asked, “Is there any way you could translate the journal? I'd really like to read it.” Before Ms. Sayer could respond, he continued, “Partially I'd like to know more about my great-grandfather, and the clock, and partially I want to know if we could use magic to stop what is going on, especially since the clock is stopped. I mean, *if*” (and here he glanced sarcastically at Ms. Sayer) “if Mr. Stryker sees the clock as a threat, doesn't that mean that he is using magic, or at least knows about it? How else would he know to neutralize the clock and its effects?”

“Well, Julian, I hadn't thought of that, but it does make sense.” She paused again, as if weighing the pros and cons of going on. “There are two things you should know. First, I anticipated this, and I have prepared a hasty translation.” At this she glanced over at her very untidy desk, where her laptop sat. Turning to it, she tapped the space bar, and the laptop woke up, displaying a document. “Here it is, and I don't think I can in good conscience forbid you to see it. I'll e-mail it to you.”

She watched the hopeful expression of Julian's face for a moment and then went on: “But you need to realize that as much as you want to fight what's going on, you have to be very careful. Careful because the board has every right to sell Parker's Piece if it so chooses and careful because magic is, I think, dangerous, dangerous for the reasons I just explained. It can only be used properly when it is used selflessly. Otherwise you risk damaging your soul.”

“I understand,” Julian said. “I don't want to break any rules, and I certainly don't want to do anything dangerous, but I at least need to understand.”

“Fair enough. Now, you should be getting along to practice, and promise me that you’ll come back and ask questions once you’ve read the journal and not do anything rash.”

“I promise.” Julian hesitated, and then asked “What happens to the journal now?”

“I will give it to Mr. Perry, and I’ll tell him that you found it and give it to me. He may want to hear the story from you.”

“OK. As long as it ends up back where it should be, with the clock, I’m happy.”

“All right. Get going now, I don’t want Coach Yates complaining to me.”

“Thanks, Ms. Sayer. See you.”

Chapter Eight: The Plot Thickens

Saturday night, Julian, Tess, Ryan, and Hieu gathered again in the library's study room. One of the few places they could meet indoors that promised privacy, the room made sense, as long as they looked like they were using it for study and weren't keeping the room from anyone else. Since there was no study hall to worry about on Friday or Saturday, that was unlikely. Julian had stayed up into the early morning hours reading the transcript of the journal, and so had slept a good part of the day. The paper had published their editorial on Friday ("Ackermann didn't like it, but the rule is that we publish all editorials, unless they are obscene, so she had to allow it!" Tess said with a grin), and they all felt that the time had come for an in-depth conference, for them all to compare notes and decide on their next step. Now that Julian had digested the journal he was ready to talk about it, and also to hear what Ryan had found out about the committee meetings.

As it turned out, if they were going to listen in they would have to act quickly. Ryan had used his dad's access to the board members' area of the website to discover that the next meeting of the finance committee was that very Monday evening, in the board room.

"I thought your dad was off the board now," Tess said.

"He is, but they haven't deleted his access yet, and Dad is so lame when it comes to passwords. It wasn't hard to figure out."

"So what are we going to do?" Tess asked. "How can we listen in?"

They all looked meaningfully at Hieu, who rolled his eyes.

"Alright, alright. Yes, I figured something out." Hieu paused for a second, and then opened his laptop.

Hieu tapped the keyboard of the machine to wake it up, and launched the web browser. He typed in an address, entered a username and password in the page that loaded, and suddenly they were looking at Hieu's room, and listening to the music playing from the computer speakers on his desk.

"I'm glad to see that no one is in my room," Hieu said.

"Cool!" Ryan said. "How'd you do that?"

Grinning, Hieu said, "It's really easy. It's an off the shelf wireless camera and mic, small enough to be hidden. It broadcasts the signal to a receiver wirelessly, and from there it goes out to the Internet. I just logged in to it from here to pick up the feed."

Ryan snorted, "I'm glad to see you turn off the lights and music when you leave the room."

"I usually do, Mr. Greener-Than-Thou, but I figured I would need to demonstrate this for you guys."

"It's important, actually," Julian said. "This means that there has to be enough light in the room if we're to see anything, like who is there. I guess we just have to take our chances. Thanks, Hieu, this is great."

"Actually," said Hieu, "it does have infrared capability, though it's a bit limited. Still, it's better than nothing."

"Brilliant!" enthused Tess, grinning. "But how do we know where to put it? And when?"

Ryan bit his lip, considering. "Well, we know the committee meets Monday night, and they almost certainly meet in the boardroom, as that's the nicest place on campus. And we know they meet at 8:00. So we just have to plant the mic before study hall begins, and then be somewhere where we can watch the feed."

"What's the range on this thing?" Tess asked. "We're not that far from your room right now, but how close do we have to be to pick up the signal?"

"We don't have to be close to the camera itself. The receiver has to be within 200 feet of the camera with no obstructions. With walls and piping, less. We can actually be anywhere there is Internet access, but we probably need to be in the area in case something goes wrong."

Ryan said, "It sounds like we could be somewhere in Bishop Bowes and pick it up."

"How about this room?" Julian suggested. "We can meet here to study for Paulette's test and listen in."

"That should work, except that we don't all have her test," Ryan said with a wicked grin at Julian and Tess, both in sophomore English. "But we could be helping you all. Groups are in here all the time. As long as we're not loud, Mrs. Bibfeldt won't care."

“But how do we plant the camera?” Tess asked. “We have to get into the boardroom ahead of time.”

Ryan had the solution to that problem, though it was a risky one: “I think I can get a key from Coach. Yates trusts me and I can tell her that I left something up there when we were volunteering. Then I can just slide in during dinner when most people are over in the dining hall.”

“That's fine,” Julian said. Then, thinking he was geekier than Ryan, and that he did not want to expose Hieu to more risk, he said, “But I need to go with you in case there are technical difficulties.”

Hieu looked relieved. “I can be downstairs monitoring. We'll need to test the connection and make sure it works before you leave the room.”

They all agreed on the plan, none of them talking about the risk they were taking. If they were caught eavesdropping on a board committee meeting, the penalty would certainly be severe.

Suddenly changing the subject, Ryan turned the conversation to what they were all thinking of: “What about the journal? Julian, fill us in, man.”

Julian took a deep breath and let it out with a rush. He looked at his three friends, friends he had not known very long, but to whom he felt a real connection. Grinning sheepishly, he said, “It's pretty strange stuff. I wouldn't believe it myself if I hadn't experienced what the clock does and if Stryker and Ms. Sayers didn't think it was real. I'm kinda afraid to describe it.”

Tess spoke for them all, saying “Julian, don't be daft. Clearly this is a big deal, and somehow something strange is involved. But we need to know how. Lay it on us.”

So Julian did. He told them about his conversation with Ms. Sayers, as strange as it was. About his great-grandfather's view of the meaning of life. About (as well as he could explain it) self-transcendence and the lasting meaning found through it, through experiencing the inner unity of all. About how the clock is actually a conduit that brings the sense of peace that comes from meaning to us. About how Dr. Drake had enchanted the clock and placed it at the heart of the campus in order to hold back the corruption that the desire for power brings. And about Dr. Drake's disappointment and his departure from St. Eligius with the clock.

“I haven't read the real thing,” Julian went on to say. “It's in Latin, but Ms. Sayers e-mailed me a translation.” He opened his laptop and after a few

moments, found the file. He went on, “a lot of it is hard to read, even in English. It's full of passages like this:

And so, the struggle between good and evil being what it is, and human desire for power and security strong, I have imbued this clock with the aura of the Great Unity. For those who cannot find it for themselves, who cannot seek the center that leaves the self behind, and so unlock the secret peace that comes of seeing that all is One, this clock will provide it. Its measured pace will outrun the ceaseless stirring of our lives, the empty grasping that leads nowhere. My hope is that this peace will enable those who feel it to simply live, resting in the peace of unity. My hope, too, is that the gift of this clock to St. Eligius School for Boys will help its head masters stay the course of right, by its nature of resistance to the temptations of power and wealth and senseless change.”

“Wow, that's intense,” said Ryan.

“Yeah, it goes on like that for pages and pages.”

“Now we know why Stryker attacked the clock and hid the journal,” Tess said. “Or Ackermann, I bet she did it for him, that duffer.”

“Yep,” Julian said. “Obviously he sees the clock as a threat to what he is trying to do, and the journal as the secret to the clock.”

Tess looked thoughtful. “How is the journal the secret to the clock?” she asked.

“Well, he doesn't just talk about the clock, he also writes about magic and how he used it to make the clock.”

“Like, you mean, he tells you how to use magic?!” Ryan asked.

Julian hesitated, and then said, “Yep, he does.”

“Well, are you going to tell us?” Ryan said.

“I guess so. It all has to do with the inner unity stuff. Basically, he says that because at its heart everything in the universe is connected, it's possible to do things that aren't normally possible, if you know how to access that unity. He says that you have to reach a state of self-transcendence, where you leave yourself behind, where the division between subject and object starts to dissolve in unity, and once you're there, you kind of imagine, or as he says, 'be,' what it is that you want to have happen. Since everything is really one, connected to everything else, if you're in touch with that unity, then it happens.”

“Hold on, hold on,” Tess said. “What happens?”

“What you want. That's why it's magic. He describes things like moving objects, crossing great distances quickly, slowing time. It's pretty wild. Basically because you are transcending time and space in the experience of unity, the limitations of time and space can also be broken.”

Hieu spoke up: “It sounds a bit like Buddhist meditation. Except for the magic part. But the idea of transcending the self, the loss of duality, recognizing the identity of all things, that's very Buddhist. The monks at home go on about that. But you mean, like, you can do *anything?*”

“Well, no, not anything. He is pretty clear that you can't use this magic for harm or personal gain because it's all about transcending the self and desires. And I think the really hard part is that to do this, to actually work magic, you have to approach the state of unity, but you have to balance that with enough sense of yourself to act. And, to get in that state of transcendence, you have to move beyond anger, fear, hatred, desire, basically anything that focuses on your separate self.”

“Sounds Buddhist,” said Hieu.

“Sounds impossible,” said Tess. “Can anyone do it?”

“He talks about that. He says that anyone should be able to do it, but from his study of history and of people, some seem to find it much easier than others.”

“Well, there's our solution for the committee.” The sound of Ryan's voice seemed to hang in the air. “All you have to do is figure this out and we can listen in from the comfort of your dorm room.”

“Me?” Julian said. “What makes you think I can do this?”

“It was *your* great-grandfather who cooked all this up. It must run in the family.”

Julian swallowed, and the familiar pit returned to his stomach. “Look, this is intense stuff. Dr. Drake talks about studying this for years. I can't learn how to do this. We need to follow our original plan.”

“I think Julian is right about the plan,” Tess said. Small though she was, Tess seemed to have the intensity of a natural leader, and Julian was grateful for that leadership now. “The committee meets Monday, and we have to know what they talk about. The camera will work.” Tess paused. “But, I also think Julian should study up. Somebody's going to have to know this stuff eventually.”

“Why?” Ryan asked.

“Because Stryker clearly knows about the clock and the magic, and he probably is using some himself. We have to be able to fight that.”

Though he did not want to, Julian found himself nodding and looking intensely at Tess. He swallowed. “I think you're right. And the journal does talk about dark magic, about the power than can be unleashed for harm, by those who deny the unity of all. He basically says, uh, let me find it here, let's see, yeah:

The dark abyss of nothingness, of the denial of unity and the corruption of its goodness, can be unleashed as well, by those who would risk the utter dissolution of their souls in the grip of nonbeing. Such risk will bring death, but in the near term those hungry for the power to feed their desires can find it and find the power to hurt and control others to gain their ends.

He doesn't talk a lot about it beyond that, but clearly he believed there was a threat.”

“OK. So Ryan gets the key, he and Julian plant the camera, we all listen in,” Tess said. “Meanwhile, Julian gets to work learning some magic.”

Julian swallowed again. They were all watching him, and then Tess said, “You can do this, mate.”

“I'll try.”

~

As it turned out, none of them could have known just how true or how urgent the committee meeting on Monday made Tess' prediction about the need for someone to learn more about magic. After practice, Julian noticed that Ryan hung behind to talk to Coach Yates, and when Ryan caught up with him in the middle of Parker's Piece, he grinned and said, “Got it.”

Once back on the quad, Ryan and Julian stopped by the library, where Julian had left his backpack before practice. Mrs. Bibfeldt grinned at the boys, saying “I was wondering whose pack that was. I'm glad you came by to get it.”

Julian, knowing that he had left the pack there intentionally, so he could get it after practice, felt like a jerk, but tried to grin and mumbled, “Thanks, Mrs. Bibfeldt.”

Taking advantage of the fact that most students and masters were heading to the dining hall, the two left the library and, instead of going down

the stairs, began the climb to the fourth floor. When they entered the hallway, they listened quietly for a few moments, and then with a shrug Ryan pulled out Coach Yates' key, put it into the lock, and turned the knob. Julian was relieved when the lock clicked, and they quickly entered the room.

“Where should we put it?” Ryan asked.

Julian didn't answer at first. Again, he was overcome with a feeling about the room, about the role it must have played in his great-grandfather's time at St. Eligius. Knowing now what had happened with the division on the faculty, with Dr. Drake's decision to leave, it made sense. This room, the site of faculty meetings, must have seen a lot.

Shaking his head to get himself back to the present, Julian squatted down, unzipped his pack, and from an internal pocket drew out the tiny black camera that Hieu had given him, with its separate power supply. The camera itself was barely an inch long and less than an inch wide and thick, and the battery pack about the same, so Julian figured it would not be too hard to hide. But where?

“It's got to be near the table, so the mic picks up sound and so we get a good view. But how will we be able to see everyone at the meeting?”

“How about up there?” Ryan pointed to the ceiling above the conference table in the middle of one end of the large room.

“Well . . . the ceiling is not tile, so we can't cut a hole in it. Wait! Could you reach the projector?”

Ryan looked at the LCD projector that hung well down from the vaulted ceiling from a black pipe, balanced so as to aim at a screen that must retract into the ceiling at one end of the room. “I can if I stand on the table.”

Ryan quickly untied his shoes and slipped them off, and then walked over to the table and hopped lightly onto it, shuffled down to the center, under the projector, and reached up with outstretched arms. “Easy, I think. I can put it right up here and the lens can look through one of the holes in the bracket.”

Julian held the camera up to him, and Ryan reached up again, carefully sliding the camera into the space between the projector and its mounting bracket. Fortunately, the bracket was black, and so once Ryan had the camera in place, it was invisible. Checking again to make sure the lens

could see down, Ryan hopped back down to the floor. “Done. Let's get out of here.”

~

After dinner the four met in the library conference room. Once they explained to Mrs. Bibfeldt about Ms. Paulette's test the next day, she gave them a knowing look and let them be. In the minutes before study hall began at 8:00, the library gradually began to fill, but other than a few disappointed looks that the room was taken, no one gave them a second glance. Making sure that his laptop screen was not facing the window of the room, Hieu woke the machine and launched his browser. After a few clicks, a dim vision of the board room conference table, seen from above, appeared on the screen.

“I don't think any lights are on yet up there. We'll have to wait and see.”

The other three tried not to look too obviously interested in Hieu's screen, and tried to look like they were studying, as hard as it was to do so. Fortunately, they did not have long to wait. At 7:55, the picture on the screen suddenly lit up, and they heard the tinny speakers of the laptop transmitting the sound of voices and moving chairs. Unfortunately, as the participants in the meeting began taking their seats, they realized that they would not be able to see them all. While the camera gave a good view of the table, it showed only its center, and the most they could see were four board members, two on each side of the table. None of them were Mr. Stryker.

Glancing at each other, they listened carefully. At first the conversation was routine chatting, but then at 8:00 one of the board members, invisible to them, called the meeting to order. The first topic was approval of minutes from the last meeting, and since no one read them out, the listeners learned nothing. Next was a discussion of the date of the next meeting. After a few minutes the members settled on a Monday evening four weeks away. The four of them again looked at each other, and Julian knew they would be listening in again. The voice at the end of the table then brought up the question of the budget for the coming school year.

“For the benefit of our new members, it might be useful to go over the process we use. Typically, at this time of year, the Headmaster begins

preparation of a budget for the coming school year, to be presented to the board for approval at the April meeting. Right now, this committee needs to think about any issues that we feel the Headmaster should take into consideration when he begins that planning process.”

Another voice, this time from one of the members in view, asked: “Dr. Stephens, are there any issues you already have in mind that will influence your budget planning?”

The boys realized with a start that Dr. Stephens was in the meeting. His calm voice answered, “Beyond the normal concerns to present a balanced budget and provide for an adequate program, no, sir.”

“I find that hard to believe.” Julian stiffened, knowing the voice instantly.

“That's him! That's Stryker,” Julian said to the others.

“Put a sock in it!” urged Tess. “Listen!”

Dr. Stephens was responding: “Can you explain, please, Mr. Stryker?”

There was a pause, one that seemed to stretch to eternity, and then Stryker's voice came through the speakers: “I find it hard to believe simply because you make no reference to long-term planning for the school.” The voice, though it was critical of Dr. Stephens, seemed to drip honey.

“Long-term planning is something we are doing continuously, sir. We hope to launch a capital campaign, a fundraising drive for the school, in two years, but we believe that in the current economic climate it would be imprudent to rush that.” Dr. Stephens voice seemed strangely hesitant, as if he lacked confidence in what he was saying.

Mr. Stryker replied, again in a voice that seemed almost to distort the air around it with its attractive sound, “But are there no other funding sources? It seems to me that the school is living very close to the edge, close to financial ruin in fact, and submitting just one more budget won't change that. What we need is more progressive thinking, new ways of looking at these questions.”

There were murmurs of agreement around the table. The boys looked at each other again. “That can't be right!” said Julian.

Ryan agreed: “My dad always told me that Dr. Stephens ran a tight ship, and that he was always impressed with the financial planning the school did.”

“There's something going on here . . . something's not right. He's talking about selling Parker's Piece!” Julian said.

As if to underline Julian's statement, the camera's window on the computer suddenly went dark, the sound cut out, and an error dialogue box popped up saying “Signal lost.”

“Hey!” Tess and Julian said together. Hieu was already trying to get the signal back.

“It's no use,” he said after a few minutes. He had tried everything he could think of, but kept getting an error message. “I don't get it. I put a fresh battery in the camera; it should last for a long time, and the signal was perfect. The camera's on, but it simply isn't sending any images.”

“Someone's stopping it.”

“What do you mean, Julian?” Tess asked.

“It was Stryker. I know it. He must have detected the camera and blocked it out.”

“How?”

“Magic.”

Ryan frowned. “Couldn't it just be a coincidence?”

It was Hieu's turn to frown now: “There's nothing wrong with my setup. I'm detecting the camera, it's on, but I'm getting nothing. It's weird.”

“It's more than weird,” Julian said, “it's magic. Didn't you guys hear his voice? I think he's using magic to control the group. Didn't you notice how Dr. Stephens sounded like a fool and Stryker sounded all wise and like someone you want to agree with? He's figured out how to use magic, and he's influencing the group, and he must have realized we were watching and shut us down.”

Ryan looked intently at Julian. “But if he knows we were watching, could he know where we are now?”

“Yes, I think he does,” Tess said. “Look who's coming.”

Looking out the room's window, Julian felt his stomach lurch. Mrs. Ackermann, her wrinkled face twisted in a frown, was walking as fast as her dignity allowed her toward the room.

“She never pulls evening duty! What's she doing here?” Ryan asked.

Mrs. Ackermann's arrival at the door prevented any speculation on the answer to the question. It was all too obvious, anyway.

When she opened the door, she found the four studying English. Ryan and Hieu were calling our review questions to Tess and Julian, who apparently were struggling to answer.

“Let me see your laptops!” Mrs. Ackermann snarled. A short, but still somehow large, woman, she had short, grey hair, a face that always seemed unhappy, and a tendency to wear polyester.

“Why?” Julian asked.

“I don't need a reason why. As you well know, part of the laptop program at this school is that students must relinquish their laptops to a faculty member for inspection upon request. Well, I'm requesting.”

Hieu shrugged his shoulders. “OK, no problem. Here you go,” he said, sliding his open laptop across the table. The others looked at him in barely concealed amazement and then turned theirs over as well.

With a derisive snort, Mrs. Ackermann looked at Hieu's machine and then Ryan's, ignoring the other two since they were turned off. She then turned and without a word walked out of the room.

“Wow,” Julian breathed. “That was close.”

“Not really,” said Hieu. “I have multiple desktops on my machine, and I know Ackermann doesn't know how to get to them all.” With the tap of a key, he brought the camera feed back up, confirmed that it was still blank, and then closed the window.

“Well,” said Tess. “This tells us one thing: Julian's got to get to work, or else we'll never find out the full truth of what's going on. I mean, we know Stryker wants to sell Parker's piece, but why? Why the theft, the magic?”

“Yeah,” Ryan echoed, “What's in it for him?”

Julian looked at the other two and swallowed. “OK, I'll try it. I'm not saying I can do it, but I'll try.”

Chapter Nine: The Birth of Magic

Thus began the strangest, and most difficult, month of Julian's life. Classes, practice, meals, all the routine of boarding school life went on as usual. But beneath it all, on Sunday afternoons and in the evenings after study hall, late at night and early in the morning, Julian followed in his great-grandfather's footsteps. He began by turning to the journal. There he found passages that were helpful, at least in theory. In practice, they weren't of much use because Julian had to work hard without guidance. It was like trying to follow a lab manual without having a teacher there to help. But, he reflected, at least he had the manual. He had found one passage in particular to be helpful, a passage in which he felt that Dr. Drake was almost speaking to him directly:

Here are the steps that I have followed, and which must be followed, in order to manifest the power of the Great Unity. The most important is the first: your motive. It must be pure and not selfish, as transcendence of the self is the key to this magic. The second is to move into a state of self-transcendence, a kind of prayer or Eastern meditation. The goal is a hard-won tension, a tension between an awareness of the unity of all things (and so of the loss of the distinct self) and an awareness of the self and its pure goals. Finally, if this is achieved, with the part of the self that remains self-aware, you must be what you seek to achieve, you must bring to mind the state that should be. If your goal is pure, and if you have truly transcended the self, then this state will occur . . .

Dr. Drake then went on to describe things happening that seemed impossible: moving objects through space and time, including himself, slowing or stopping time, being in one place yet experiencing another, and the like.

Reading this, Julian felt he should start small and decided to try and move a small object, even though in the journal Dr. Drake said that there was no difference in any of these actions once unity was achieved and space and time transcended. But to Julian, starting with something small was comforting. On a Saturday evening, after watching a crew race and then dinner, Julian walked down to Parker's Piece and found one of the spreading oak trees. He asked Tess to go with him, finding some comfort in her

cheerful enthusiasm and her determination that he could succeed. He sat down cross legged beneath the tree with a flashdrive on his lap in front of him. Tess sat across from him.

“What do you want me to do?” she asked.

“Just be here. I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

Looking upward, Julian saw the many branches of the tree spread outwards and up to the sky, which was orange-purple in the growing dusk as it filtered down through the crowded branches.

“God, it’s beautiful.”

“Lovely indeed.”

Taking a deep breath, Julian said, “OK. Let’s see. I know I need to start with a pure motive.”

“You’ve got that, Julian, that’s easy. You have to learn this to stop Stryker, to find out what he’s up to and to stop it. Whatever lays beneath the things that are happening, it can’t be good. You know that.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s the easy part. But the next step, prayer or meditation, I think that will be really hard. I’ve never prayed in my life, and I haven’t meditated.”

“You can do it. You can. You have to try.” She smiled at him, her tousled hair blowing over her face.

“Well, I did some digging around online. I think the key is to distract the mind from dwelling on itself and its desires and problems. You can do it by focusing on an object, a flower or a drawing, or by counting breaths or by thinking only about someone else. The key is that the mind needs to leave itself behind.”

“OK. What’s it gonna be, then?”

Julian had already decided to try focusing on the tree, that’s why he wanted to come here. Online he had found various images, called mandalas, some Buddhist, intricate circular drawings that drew the mind into them, some Christian, showing images of the cross and Jesus Christ intertwined in a way that also drew the mind in. Julian had looked at these, but in the end had decided on the tree as something physical.

“The tree. That’s why I wanted to come here. I know it shouldn’t matter, but it seems like something physical would be easier.”

“All right, then. Go on. I’ll just be quiet.”

Sitting there, he tried to breathe slowly and regularly, and doing so he looked up into the many intertwining branches of the great tree, trying not to think of anything else. It was extraordinarily difficult. He followed one branch from the trunk, up and out as it dissolved into a riot of green leaves. Then he moved on to another. It took time, a lot of time. It was so hard to stay focused. He was not aware of it, but Tess began to worry as the sun set and Julian remained still, staring up into the branches of the great tree. Gradually Julian realized that though it was one tree, he was experiencing each branch in itself. Or was it that though it was many branches, he was experiencing one tree? Somehow the distinction between tree and branches grew thin, until he could no longer tell them apart, nor that it was he looking at them.

With a gasp Julian realized he was teetering on the brink of losing all sense of himself, of the passage of time, of the difference between him and the tree, between him and the universe, between the tree and the universe which it called to mind with its unity of many disparate branches. Before he did so completely he reached out with his mind, and slowly the flashdrive, that marvel of plastic and silicon and myriad electronic branches, so unlike and yet like the tree above him, began to rise from his lap. With a gasp Julian looked down. The flashdrive tumbled into his lap, and with a rush he was intensely aware of himself and his surroundings and the fact that it was now dark. But his disorientation quickly vanished in the glowing sense that he had done it, and in the overwhelming hug and squeal of delight from Tess.

~

The next day, he tried again, and once under the branches of the tree, he found entering the right state to be just a little easier. This time, once he was there, he was able to raise the flash drive from his lap and to move it slowly across to Tess, where it dropped gently onto her outstretched leg.

“Gor! Impossible! Brilliant! You did it again!”

After that, things went faster but not necessarily easier. Julian now knew that he could do it, and he kept practicing, at first under the tree, and then in other places when Tess wryly pointed out that he wouldn't be of much use against Stryker if he had to sit under a tree to work magic. He had

gradual success, first being able to move the flashdrive higher and a few feet across the meadow, and then across his room. His feelings were a constant challenge. Anytime that he felt anger or frustration or desire, even if these emotions were connected with stopping Stryker, his ability to hold the unity in his consciousness evaporated and he would have to start again or simply give up, sometimes for days. But he continued to make progress.

Milestones included the first time he worked magic in the presence of all three friends and not just in front of Tess, causing the time for the four of them to slow so that the clocks on their laptops registered a change of only a minute while they themselves felt many minutes go by. Or the time when, sitting with Tess in the meadow, Julian was able, after intense concentration, to reach out into the mind of a nearby squirrel. Though afterwards Julian was disturbed by his ability to do this, worrying that he had controlled the mind of the squirrel, he could not deny the feeling of amazement he had when Tess described what had happened. She had seen the squirrel change its direction, jump down from an overhead branch, walk over to her and take an acorn from her hand. During those moments, Julian didn't see Tess as Tess. Entering into the squirrel, becoming the squirrel, his own self-consciousness was gone, and he felt briefly the simple bliss of being wholly what his nature was, of simply being an animal without the contradictions and cares of humanity. Tess had to describe what happened, and that was a drawback. When Julian really reached out of himself, he had to struggle not only to keep the balance between unity and himself, but also to keep his feelings at bay. The result was that he was quite literally unaware of his surroundings, and Tess was frightened for him, feeling that he needed protection.

After the squirrel incident, Julian felt very self-conscious. They were still sitting under the tree when Julian asked, "Tess, does this bother you? Do you think I'm strange, some kind of monster?"

She looked at him for a minute, her dark eyes intense. Then she spoke: "No, I don't. I've seen this whole thing evolve. I know why you decided to do this. I know how you learned it. It all makes sense. You're not out beheading roosters or raising the dead. You're simply—and I know it's not easy—channeling something, accessing something that I think we all could if we knew how. So no, it doesn't bother me. I think it's brilliant. I do think

that you need to be careful who sees you do this, or it could cause trouble. But you're safe with me." She smiled.

"Thanks. Thanks a lot. You know I don't like to stand out or be noticed. It's weird, but I feel like this is something I can do, and I don't think it's evil."

"It's not evil. You know that. But do you think that you can stop Stryker, who I bet *is* evil?"

"I dunno. I feel more confident that I can do some of the things Dr. Drake describes. I might even be able to project my consciousness across a distance and listen in on the next committee meeting. But . . ."

"But?"

"Well, I don't have a weapon. He doesn't talk about a weapon anywhere. I mean, he talks about the powers of Dark Magic, saying that those who use it cannot circumvent time and space in the same way because their approach denies the unity of all things. Dark Magic releases the power of nonbeing, of destruction. He seemed to scoff at this, but, but, what do I do if I have to face that? I have no idea."

"Julian?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you remember in history, when our classes got to the late Middle Ages and we read that short bit from Julian of Norwich? You know, the first woman to write a book in English?"

"Yes. She was the mystic who wrote after the Black Death about the universal love of God, or something like that."

"Quite. Well, you remember what she said, I know: *All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.*' Julian, she's your namesake. You will think of something, I know it. And we'll all help, all of us. Remember that."

~

The day of the meeting, Julian found himself getting increasingly nervous. Their plan was to use the library conference room again, and they had agreed to meet there at 7:45. The day seemed to drag on forever; neither Algebra II nor English nor even history held any interest for him. Finally dinner was over (though he found he could eat nothing), and he made his way with Ryan to the library. They found Hieu and Tess waiting for them, and they didn't look happy.

“What's up?” Ryan asked.

In response, Tess merely inclined her head towards the conference room. Julian looked: Mrs. Ackermann was sitting in the room, apparently hard at work. He couldn't believe it.

“She's there on purpose. Has to be,” said Tess.

“Now what do we do?” Julian asked.

“Can't we go back to dorm?” Hieu threw in.

“No way,” said Tess. “Julian can't do this alone, or in the room with John. We've got to watch out for him.” Tess had been the most involved with Julian's trials in magic so far and continued to be anxious for him. She also wasn't about to be left out.

“It'll be easier if I'm closer anyway.” said Julian.

“I thought it didn't matter,” said Ryan.

“Well, yeah, supposedly, but it helps me.”

“Guys, keep it down,” whispered Hieu.

They looked up to see Mrs. Bibfeldt looking at them, her normally kind faced creased in a frown.

“What about one of the classrooms upstairs?” Hieu continued.

“Yeah! We could use Paulette's room. She lives off campus and is never in her room at night,” said Ryan.

“Alright. Let's go, but don't rush, just walk out normally like we're heading back to dorm,” Tess said.

Mrs. Bibfeldt watched them leave but luckily didn't say anything. None of the m liked the idea of lying to her. Once out of the main room of the library they climbed the stairs quietly to the third floor, where the English classrooms were. They padded down the hall and opened the door to Mrs. Paulette's room, which fortunately was unlocked. Moonlight streamed in the windows, illuminating the room enough to see, though the corners were in shadow. Besides her desk to one side of the room, and the student desks arranged in a circle in the middle of the room, Ms. Paulette kept three armchairs in the room to encourage reading.

Julian said, “I'll use one of these,” and gingerly settled himself into one of the chairs, trying to clear his mind and not to think about the regular daily events that occurred in the room. Tess nodded. “You guys watch the hall; I'll stay with Julian.”

Ryan and Hieu headed back toward the door, Ryan slipping into the dark hallway to head for the stairs and Hieu staying by the door. Julian tried not to think about the risks they were all running and began to clear his mind. He had decided to try to project his consciousness into the room upstairs so that they would not be dependent on any device or technology. While his body would remain in the classroom, his consciousness would be upstairs, defying the limitations of space that separated them. At least, that was the idea.

As Julian cleared his mind, he imagined himself in the board room. He tried to let go of his anxieties, his anger, his fear for the school. The room around him grew even dimmer, as if not the light but the very color or substance of the room were being turned down. For a time, how long he had no idea, all he was aware of was darkness. Gradually it receded, in a way just opposite to how the classroom had disappeared. He began to notice light and then color, at first through a fog, and then slowly they became clearer, until he became aware of details. He was in the boardroom, or at least it felt so. And he could hear voices. The committee was deep in discussion. Julian could not see his own body; it was as if his mind simply floated in the room, and so he willed it to float closer to the table, where he could listen to the discussion.

A woman at the end of the table, whom Julian realized must be Ms. Cavanaugh, the chair, was saying, "I still don't see the connection between selling Parker's Piece and this proposal to privatize the school."

Stryker, seated along one side of the table, said, "Selling the meadow will net an estimated twenty million dollars, which would create an immediate boost to the school's endowment. That, in turn, will make the school much more attractive to companies who are interested in partnering with schools to manage them for profit. So in one move, we become more stable, and open the door to joining the latest movement in education, a movement which has a lot of interest in Washington."

Another man said "And are we sure there would be a buyer for the land? With the economy the way it is, is anyone buying real estate?"

Stryker responded, "I know for a fact that some firms are thinking ahead to after this recession, and I believe that one, BRC, is very interested and is willing to put up cash."

"What," Ms. Cavanaugh said, "would they do with the land?"

“A planned community, built in consultation with the school, which would be architecturally in keeping with the campus and which would give us a new supply of day students.”

Julian noticed that Dr. Stephens remained quiet during this exchange, as did others around the table. “Dr. Stephens,” said one, “What do you think of this plan for privatization?”

Dr. Stephens seemed oddly surprised to be addressed and hesitated, as if unsure how to respond. “Um, well, I have never closely studied the idea of corporate education, always believing that our motive is the education of our students, rather than profit.” He paused again, growing more and more unsure of what he was saying. “However, there certainly is new research on the subject, and a lot of discussion of it . . .” Here he suddenly became less vague: “I do think that if that is the course the school takes, then I am not the person to lead the institution.”

This caused some members around the table to lean forward in concern, but others seemed excited at the prospect.

Stryker spoke again. “There is certainly no need to rush to any conclusions,” he said soothingly. “I say that we simply put forward a motion on the sale of the meadow at the coming board meeting and leave questions about privatization to another time. The one does not have to follow the other.”

This seemed welcome around the table, as if Stryker had suddenly rescued them from the brink of a precipice. There were nods from most of those seated there.

“Is there a motion then?” said Ms. Cavanaugh.

Mr. Stryker spoke promptly: “I move that we present the following motion to the full Board of Governors: that the board authorize the finance committee to solicit offers for the sale of Parker's Piece meadow and that if offers exist which meet or exceed the fair market value, determined by assessment, then the board further authorizes the finance committee to proceed with the sale. Proceeds from the sale should go directly to the St. Eligius' School Endowment.”

“Is there a second?”

A man sitting next to Mr. Stryker, a small, unpleasant looking man whom Julian recalled talking with Mr. Stryker at the board meeting in January, said “I second the motion.”

“Any further discussion?” Ms. Cavanaugh's question hung there, but there was no response.

“All in favor?” The “ayes” filled the room. “That is the last item on our agenda. I will type up the motion and get it to the Chair of the Board. We are adjourned.”

As the meeting broke up and members began filing out of the room, Julian realized that Stryker and the small man were whispering together as they approached the door. He focused intently on their conversation.

The small man was saying, “How can you be so sure we *will* find a buyer? The market is awfully bleak.”

“Leave that to me. I will see to it that BRC makes the offer. They—and I—have a lot to gain by this,” Stryker whispered.

“But you can't be connected to them, that would be a conflict of interest in violation of the Board's bylaws.”

Stryker scoffed. “Haven't you heard of holding companies? It's done all the time. Besides . . .”

Suddenly, Julian found the room fading, growing dim until it was black, and the outlines of Ms. Paulette's room were swimming in front of his eyes. Tess had been shaking him and calling his name.

“Hey, whyd'ya do that? Stryker was just revealing the details of his plan!”

“Julian, shut up!” Tess whispered. “You were getting agitated and started to talk out loud, almost shouting, and the board members are coming down the stairs. We've got to be quiet.”

Julian saw that Hieu and Ryan were back in the room, and he heard the distant sounds of heels and voices in the stairwell. They all looked worried.

“I can't believe it,” Julian whispered. “They passed a motion to go to the full board to sell Parker's Piece. Dr. Stephens was there, and he didn't protest. Stryker must have had them all under his influence again. They also talked about having the school run by a corporation, but that didn't make it into the motion. It was all Stryker's idea. Clearly he wants to get this formally before the board so they can vote on it, and he can control the voting by magic.”

“But why does he want to do this? I still don't get it.” Ryan whispered.

“That was the part that he was talking about with this other guy, kind of a weasel, as they were walking out. He was saying that he could get a company to buy Parker's Piece and that he stood to gain a lot from it.”

“Wow,” Ryan whispered. “That's a conflict of interest.”

“That's what weasel man said, but Stryker said not to worry about it, something about a holding company. That's when you brought me back.”

“What's conflict of interest mean exactly?” Tess asked.

“The Board has rules for itself,” Ryan said. “I think they're called bylaws, and usually they require that any board member who is part of a company doing business with the school recuse himself from votes and discussion of anything having to do with the company, because it is a conflict of that member's interests. Sometimes board members are not even allowed to serve if they have connections to certain other corporations.”

Julian thought about what he had heard, wishing it hadn't been cut off. “A holding company must be a company that owns other companies, so there is not a direct connection. Stryker must own a holding company that owns the company that wants to buy Parker's Piece. He said they, BRC or something, want to build a housing development on the land. Because he is not directly connected to BRC, he thinks that gets him out of the conflict of interest rules.”

“So he's going to make a pile of money from the sale of Parker's Piece because one of his companies will sell a bunch of houses on it,” Tess said.

“Now we know why he wants to do this,” said Ryan.

“Yeah, and he's getting away with it because his magic is making them all idiots and because he makes it sound like this will save the school by increasing the endowment. You should have seen Dr. Stephens; he just sat there.” Julian paused. “He did say that if the school went for this idea of a private corporation running the school for profit, that he could not be the Head. And no one seemed to be bothered by that. Idiots. What are we going to do? We have to stop this.”

Chapter Ten: Board Meeting

That night the boys and Tess successfully sneaked back to their rooms, leaving Bishop Bowes after study hall had concluded. But though the night was a success, and they now knew Mr. Stryker's plans, they had no clear notion of how to stop them. In the weeks following the committee meeting, the four talked endlessly about what to do. Since Mr. Stryker seemed able to control the adults around him, appealing to them did not seem to offer any hope. Julian remembered what Ms. Sayers had said to him about the Board: they could sell Parker's Piece if they chose. They could even fire Dr. Stephens. They ran the school. And apparently Mr. Stryker ran them.

Julian thought about going back to Ms. Sayers and asking for her advice. He even thought about talking to Dr. Stephens. But realistically, what could either of them do? While Ms. Sayers might not scoff at the idea of magic, she had no more control over the situation than anyone else. And Dr. Stephens might well consider him crazy. In the end, Julian approached neither of them. He just wrestled with the problem in his own mind and with his friends.

As April approached the weather became warmer, but Julian's spirits did not rise with the temperature. The endless conversations led to only one conclusion, one which terrified him: they had to get into the coming Board meeting, they had to confront Stryker and somehow stop him; somehow they had to get the Board to see what was truly going on. Hieu, in his methodical way, did have one other plan: "We find out everything we can about Stryker. That should be easy enough." He was sitting at his laptop in the library with the other three on a rainy Saturday in early April.

"But no one will believe it as long as Stryker controls them," Julian said.

Hieu looked at him: "I'll get the goods on him, then you've got to set them free. Once they're released, then we can show them the proof of Stryker's connections and we're home free." He began tapping at the keyboard, running searches on Stryker and BRC. "Wow," he said after a few minutes. "He's good. I found the Board of Directors of BRC--which stands for Broughton-Rice Corporation, by the way, they're a big developer in the mid-Atlantic—and Stryker is not on it. They have a holding company,

Rollins, and Stryker's not on that board either . . . hmm. Wait a sec., here's another company that's listed as a parent company of Rollins . . . what's the difference between a holding company and a parent company?"

Julian rolled his eyes at Ryan and Tess and they simply waited.

"Oh, OK, a parent company is a company that owns a controlling share in another company, and not just shares. Anyway, this other company, ah, Stearon International, Stryker is on their board. The bastard."

Hieu busied himself with collating what he had found and in the discussion that followed, they all agreed that they had to be at the upcoming board meeting. It turned out the meeting was in late April, on a Friday two weeks away. If the opportunity presented itself, they could present the evidence, but if not, they had to stop Stryker and then do whatever they could afterwards to present their findings to the board. It was not much of a plan, but it was the best they could think of. Julian was uneasy with it, primarily because it assumed that he could stop Stryker and break his power. His original anxiety over Dark Magic returned. He knew that Stryker could control or at least influence the minds of others, but what else could he do? And what could Julian do against him?

The other problem was how they would get into the meeting. Students of course were not allowed, and the board met all day. When did they have to be there? All day? They would have to skip classes, and what if they missed the vote? Ryan, always on good terms with everyone, said "I can solve the when problem. I'll hang with Mrs. Hampstead. She probably has to do agendas and stuff for the meeting. I bet she'll know the schedule, or there'll be one on her desk. Once we know when to be there, we can meet between classes and head over."

"But how will we get in? They won't just hold the door for us!" Tess said.

"Actually, they will." Julian could hardly believe what he was saying, but he'd just had an idea that, scary as it was, would get them in to listen.

"Huh?" Ryan snorted.

"They'll hold the door. They'll have to, because we'll be invisible."

In those last two weeks, Julian worked on invisibility. He had no idea what Stryker might throw at him, and so he couldn't prepare for that. But he could practice invisibility. For the others, it was strange to watch as Julian slipped into a state of calm and then gradually faded from view. It was even stranger when Julian, confident now that he could make himself invisible and even walk around if Ryan led him, began to work on the others. As he made progress, they felt nothing, but watched as their bodies eerily faded from view. It was disconcerting, but it seemed to work as long as Julian wasn't distracted, so they figured out a plan for the day.

Based on the agenda that Ryan had seen on Mrs. Hampstead's computer ("You know, I happened to be there, just hanging out and asking her about her kids, when she had some computer trouble, and I asked if I could help"), they needed to be there at 3:30. That was when the motion for the sale of Parker's Piece was slated to be discussed, following a presentation by some people from BRC. The timing couldn't have been better. Third bell let out at 3:25, so they planned to meet in the stairwell of Bishops Bowes right at the end of class and go from there.

The day approached quickly, and before he knew it, Julian found himself waiting with Tess in the third floor stairwell, trying to breathe evenly and calmly as Ryan and Hieu climbed the stairs to join them. Once they were together, they knew they didn't have time to waste. They lined up, Ryan first, then Julian, followed by Tess and then Hieu, each of them holding on the next. Once they were invisible, they planned to walk down the hall, wait for someone to enter the room, and slip through the open doorway. As he was clearing his mind, Julian thought of the famous picture of the World War I soldiers **blinded** by mustard gas, walking in a line, each with a hand on the shoulder of the man in front of him. Grimly, he pushed the image out of his mind, hoping that they did not end up that way.

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It went much more smoothly than Julian expected. Several board members had apparently left to use the restroom in the hallway and were heading back in. They were able to shuffle along behind the last, and no one seemed to notice that the door stayed open a little longer once the last

member entered the room. The room itself was slightly dim, as the LCD projector was in use, showing an artist's rendering of Parker's Piece with houses built on it. As the students moved as quietly as they could to the back of the room, they realized that Mr. Stryker was addressing the board, following an architects' presentation.

Earlier in the day, Ms. Cavanaugh had presented the motion for the sale of Parker's Piece, and the architects' presentation had been a part of the consideration of the proposal. Now was a period for open discussion, leading to a vote. Mr. Stryker was presenting the same arguments Julian had heard already in the earlier meetings: that the school desperately needed more endowment funding, that this would lead to more security and stability for the school, to better programs for the students. And, should the board choose to pursue it, it might also create an opportunity for discussions with corporations that run schools for profit. They, as the discussions in Washington, D.C., showed, were “getting better results on testing than traditional approaches to education.”

Once again, Stryker seemed to have nothing but the best interests of the school in mind, speaking persuasively about what a larger endowment would do for the students and how a new direction for the school would launch St. Eligius into the 21st century, with its demands for new student skills. While the traditions of the school must of course be maintained, the times called on the board for visionary leadership and for decisions that “might seem, upon first consideration, controversial, but which, upon reflection, were clearly needed to set St. Eligius apart in the coming world.”

Mr. Stryker went on to say that while he was not one to question Dr. Stephens' leadership, he did think that more time should be spent on these types of questions, “positioning the school strategically for the future,” and less on questions of the history of the school and “if I may say so, rather arcane” concerns about clocks donated by discredited former teachers and “other minutia.” Here, Stryker, for emphasis, picked up the clock's pendulum, which, Julian realized with a gasp, was sitting, along with the key, on one of the tables. He explained briefly that these came from the clock now in the library, “regrettably” vandalized by students irritated by its noise. Stryker of course abhorred vandalism in any form, but in his mind it did raise the question of why the Headmaster had taken the trouble to put the clock there, a gift from a discredited former teacher who had left St. Eligius

in disrepute. The clock, he said, waving the pendulum for emphasis, was “symbolic” of a backward looking vision. It and the vision should go, replaced by the “limitless vista of the future.” The pendulum, old wood and tarnished brass, seemed to underline Stryker's point admirably, tying Dr. Stephens to a distant, and no longer relevant, past.

The board members, arranged around tables set up in a square in the front part of the ornate room, were listening raptly. No one questioned how Stryker had gotten the pendulum, or why he himself seemed concerned with something so irrelevant. No one was objecting to his proposal, not even Dr. Stephens, who sat mutely at one of the tables. As Julian listened, he became more and more angry. He simply could not believe what he was hearing. The anger surged inside of him, and his own consciousness began to dominate him. He realized that he was losing the magic, that his anger was tearing him away from his connection with unity, that he and his friends were becoming visible. At that moment, he didn't care.

“I know what you're doing! Your own firm wants to buy Parker's Piece! You don't care about the school! You want the money from the land and from the houses, and you're influencing the board to get your way!” Julian's voice rolled across the room with a resonance that surprised even him. Board members turned in their seats to stare at the back of the room, where Julian, Tess, Hieu, and Ryan, now plainly visible, stood defiantly. Mr. Stryker, his mouth still open in mid-sentence, looked at them with shock and anger, but then mastered himself and reassumed the mask of concern for the school with which he had been so persuasive.

“I beg everyone's pardon, I'm sure, but I did not know that we allowed students in board meetings.” Stryker's voice was polite, smooth, and confident, a picture of mildly offended dignity.

Dr. Stephens rose to his feet, shock on his face. “I assure you, sir, we do not. I do not know how they got here.”

Beside himself, Julian blurted out, “We're here by magic, just as Stryker is using magic to control you all, to do what he wants!”

Mr. Stryker's face took on the look of someone modestly tolerating a misbehaving child. “Magic? But that's absurd.”

Around the room, board members were muttering to themselves, and Dr. Stephens was leaving the table to walk back to where the boys stood, the irritation plain on his face. Julian realized with a gulp that pointing out the

reality of the situation would not be enough; the board was spellbound by Stryker's influence. Looking at Tess, he whispered, "He's controlling them, I've got to free them somehow or we haven't got a chance."

"Can you do it?"

"I don't know. But I've got to try."

Julian closed his eyes, trying to drop away from the scene, away from Dr. Stephens advancing on him, away from the mutterings of the board members, and most of all away from the calm but smug look on Mr. Stryker's face. As he gradually let go of his anger and anxiety, he felt the scene drift away. He knew he had to keep the room enough in focus to act, but that he could not let his feelings toward Mr. Stryker get in the way. This had to be for the right cause, or it would not be at all. How he wished the clock were working. He knew it would help him. That wasn't possible, though. He had to do what he could on his own. Imagine what needs to happen, imagine the board throwing Stryker out, not him. Imagine . . . just imagine the board being free of Stryker's influence. Julian felt his self-consciousness melt away, became lost in an overwhelming sense of freedom. Freedom from control, freedom to simply be.

The others looked at Julian a little alarmed. Julian had closed his eyes, and a faint white aura began to emanate from him, so that in a few seconds it was like they saw Julian through a thin, glowing fog. The aura slowly expanded until it enveloped most of the room and as it did so, board members looked around as if they had just awakened. Dr. Stephens, in particular, changed. He stopped in his tracks, turned back towards the front of the room, a frown on his face. Mr. Poindexter, the chairman, also stirred, and said,

"Is this true, Stryker? Do you have connections to BRC?"

The issue of why and how the students came to be in the room, and whether they should be there, seemed forgotten.

Mr. Stryker did not reply to this question, though it and others like it came from several men and women around the table. Instead he looked again to Julian, dropped the clock's pendulum on the table, and pushed his left hand toward Julian in a palm-out gesture of defiance. A darkness, but a darkness shot through with an eerie, spectral glow, like an X-ray or photo negative image created in the photo editing software Julian was familiar with, spread outward from Mr. Stryker's hand, and where it touched the white

aura, the aura faded. The board members did not seem to notice the darkness, but where it overtook them, their questions ceased, replaced by the same quiescent agreement they had shown earlier.

Now the battle was truly joined. If before Julian had been in training, playing with magic, now it was for real. Without seeing it, Julian sensed the advance of the darkness, sensed that the freedom he had given to the board members was slipping away again. Reaching deep within himself, deep down to that place of transcendence, that source of being and unity of which he knew Stryker's power was but a corruption, he pushed the white back against his foe. And so it went, the white and the black locked in a struggle, now the one would overtake most of the room, now the other. Julian could not defeat the power Stryker's hatred and lust gave him, but neither could the nothingness that Stryker unleashed win the day.

Finally, Stryker seemed to become disgusted. Turning his palm away from Julian, the darkness disappeared and with a wave of his hand, Stryker took a different tack. Gasping with effort, Julian released the white, and it too dispersed. As it did so, Julian noticed that silence had fallen. There were no more questions, no sound at all from the others in the room.

Horrorified, Julian saw that everyone in the room, Dr. Stephens, every board member, and even Ryan, Tess, and Hieu, were still and silent.

“Let them go!” Julian shouted.

“Calm yourself, boy. They are unharmed, but I will not battle you for control of their minds. I will destroy you alone, and then bring them back.”

Then it came, a force of malevolence so strong that Julian staggered back, momentarily raising his hands to defend himself physically. Then he let go as his instincts reminded him that this was no physical assault, but the power of evil, lust, and greed, the power born of the denial of any source of life outside itself, striking out to take all life into itself. With that, Julian sensed something new. He realized that deep within the power of the darkness there was more than power or anger or hatred. There was envy, there was the greed of nothingness for something, of dark for light, of cold for warmth. Instinctively Julian knew he could never defeat this power, for by matching it he would only join and enhance it. But he could resist it. He could resist not by trying to destroy it, but through understanding and pitying it. Was that really the price to be paid to stop this assault, to understand and empathize with the monster across the room from him?

Pitying its denial of the unity of all things, its arrogant insistence on its own existence in isolation from others? Unseen by Julian, whose mind was wholly absorbed with protection and, gradually, resistance, Mr. Stryker's face was twisted in inhuman fury and maniacal glee.

Julian thought of Tess, frozen beside him with Ryan and Hieu. He thought of Dr. Stephens, frozen across the room, and of the trees and beauty of Parker's Piece. He thought of his great-grandfather, whose deep love for this place was lost in the disappointment of having to leave. His great-grandfather who had stood in this very room. Julian felt sadness and connection and love. Opening his eyes for an instant, he saw, too, the misshapen face of Mr. Stryker, and he felt his anger ebb, to be replaced by sadness and pity. What would it be like to replace the friends he had found at St. Eligius with acquisition and control and power? Ultimately empty. The sadness of that flooded through Julian, and he felt the assault lessen as what he wanted became clear in his mind: peace. The peace Dr. Drake had sought, had wanted for the school, the peace he had taught Julian to find.

If Julian could have seen it, the flow of darkness from Mr. Stryker surrounded him, but now it was not so close. An envelope of light slowly pushed outward from Julian, though the force of hatred radiating from Mr. Stryker continued without letup. The darkness rushed forward to meet the ellipse of light around Julian and dissipate. Slowly, slowly the circle of light grew larger, until Tess and Ryan were inside it and stirred, looking around in fear at the scene. As the power to resist grew in him, Julian began to notice the room around him, and he saw Ryan's movement. Julian knew that he would never be able to speak, but as he teetered between the unity that gave him the power to resist and his own existence, he found a balance, and resting on that knife's edge, he reached out to Ryan with his mind.

“The clock. The pendulum and key. The clock. The pendulum and key . . .”

Freed now by Julian's resistance, Ryan could see better than Julian the situation in the room. Mr. Stryker stood in the front of the room, sending forth his torrent of darkness, which enveloped much of the room but dispersed upon meeting the shield of light surrounding Julian. In the middle of the room, in front of the board chairman, lay the pendulum and key of the clock. Though they were barely visible, Ryan could see that the light was close to reaching them. With his athletic grace, Ryan seized the moment to

pick up the nearest object at hand, a dirty plate from the luncheon served earlier, and hurled it across the room like a frisbee. It struck Mr. Stryker full in the face. Though it did him no real harm, it did distract him momentarily from his supernatural efforts. As the cloud of darkness receded, Ryan ran across the room, grabbed the pendulum and key from the table, and darted towards the door. With a snarl, Mr. Stryker sent the uncanny darkness outward once again, trying to recapture Ryan before he escaped. The light and the dark met at the doorway, catching Ryan temporarily between them. He cried out in pain, at the same time throwing himself through the doorway, and escaped.

With Ryan gone, the two forces continued to meet in the middle of the room. More comfortable now with the balance he must maintain, between unity with being and his own identity, Julian wondered how long he could do this. He felt confident he could resist, but how could he make Stryker stop? How could he ever resolve the situation, and bring it all to a peaceful end?

Then he knew. He knew that just as the truth had given him the power to resist—the paradoxical truth that the many are truly one, and the one is truly many and that to live as many, we must accept our oneness—he knew that that truth could stop Stryker, whose power was the power of denial. But how to reveal that truth? Julian knowing it would do nothing to help. Indeed, Julian's grasp of the balance he must maintain wavered again as Stryker renewed the force of his attack.

The darkness stretched forth, and though dark it was, the real threat lay in what was not there. Julian found himself gripped in a miasma of fear that struck at his very being. For the darkness was that of utter chaos. Every pointless act of violence and hatred in human history seemed to stare him in the face, every victory of destruction and mindlessness and greed, which ultimately ends in death, stared him down. And worse, Julian knew without thinking—indeed, he could not think and keep his resistance intact—that his own death called to him. The ultimate threat of annihilation, the panicking thought of his own non-existence, of nothingness, tore at him like circling crows, picking away at his confidence and strength. Julian experienced sheer terror for the first time in his life, and his precarious balance, the balance that undergirded his own existence with the support of oneness, began to slip away in his panicked worry about himself.

Beside him, Tess watched with growing fear and worry. The darkness was terrifying, and she felt her mind giving way before the sheer horror of it. And she felt Julian struggling and her fear for herself was closely matched by fear for him. She knew Julian was in trouble, but she did not know how to help, what to do. Hieu was still trapped by the darkness, and Tess knew that she would be soon as well.

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As Julian approached this moment of terror, Ryan raced down the hallway to the elevator, stabbing at the down button in his haste. No sound or light greeted him, and Ryan realized that the battle in the board room must somehow have disrupted the electricity in the building, or maybe the whole campus. Thinking that he didn't know what was impossible anymore, but that he simply had to do what Julian had asked, he continued down the hallway to the stairwell, pushed through the door, and raced downwards, taking the stairs four at a time. Two flights down, Ryan burst through the doorway into the level of the archives and the display cases. Hurrying over to the clock, where it sat in the quiet and the dust, Ryan wondered if he could do what was needed. He had seen Julian start the clock. It's just a clock, he thought. How hard can it be?

Ryan paused before the clock, to wipe his hands on his jeans and to calm his breathing. Then, seeing his face dimly reflected in the glass door of the clock, he reached out and opened the door. Gently feeling inside with his fingers, he found the hook where the small pendulum hung, and he carefully put it back in its place. Finding the key in his pocket, he fitted the barrel into one of the two winding holes in the clock face, and turned the key clockwise, repeating the motion until it would go no further. After repeating this for the other key hole, Ryan realized with a start that he had no idea what time it was. He knew it was sometime in the afternoon, and making a guess, he pushed the hands around until they read 4:00. Hoping accuracy wasn't important, he stepped back, took another breath, and then gave the pendulum a gentle push to set it swinging. The clock began its measured ticking, the pendulum swinging back and forth as if it had never ceased. Would it work? Would it matter? Gratefully, Ryan realized he could feel serenity, realized that yes, the clock was working. This was what Julian had wanted. But would it do what he needed? Ryan had never been as scared as

when he came out of the trance he was in to see Stryker's face and the horrifying forces he was unleashing. Hoping somehow to help, Ryan swallowed his fear and turned for the door to go back to the last place he wanted to be: the board room.

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Julian needed help. The dark, swirling formlessness now stretched across most of the room. The aura of light had grown smaller, surrounding only Julian and Tess. Julian had become more and more aware of himself and his predicament. As his fear grew, he began to panic and to lose his confidence. Stryker's voice did not help.

“Give up, boy. You're a mere child. You stand no chance against me! I don't care who your great-grandfather was. I am more powerful, and I get what I want!”

Julian wanted so desperately to resist further, to fight back against this man who brought evil into the very room around him. But that desire made it harder to maintain the balance he needed, and he felt himself growing more and more angry, scared, and powerless.

Tess knew that Julian was losing, knew that the darkness was about to overcome her and then Julian. Her mind numbed with fear, she could think of nothing to do, no action to take. But as the darkness closed around her, she did think of one thing to say. She took refuge in the saying she and Julian had discussed when he was first struggling with magic, and she offered it to him in thought: *“All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”* Tess' voice, quietly but irresistably, echoed faintly in Julian's mind. And just as Julian truly lost the battle, just when the force of the formless darkness enveloped him, just as he began to be aware of himself and to lose his connection to the unity of all things, he grasped at this lifeline, steadying himself metaphysically. Then he felt it. It was there without being anywhere, a sense of timeless, placeless rhythm, a flowing context for the universe. And then he knew, all *would* be well, if he was a part of that context. Not annihilated by it, but living in it and buoyed by it, acknowledging it as the source of his own being. Julian let go again, his terror dissolving in a warm whiteness that spread out from him. Julian's last conscious thought was, “Ryan did it!” For he knew the clock was working again, affirming the unity

of all things at the very heart of the campus, Dr. Drake's magic come back to help his own. And then he thought of a mirror.

The light spread out again from Julian, but now it was not shapeless. It became a wall, a mirror, and the darkness met it and was repulsed. No longer did the light struggle to push the darkness away, it simply was itself. The darkness, formless, chaotic, full of nothing, hit the light and reflected back. Back, back across the room, back to the one who had summoned it from the well of nonbeing.

Julian's knowing the truth could not defeat Mr. Stryker, but Mr. Stryker's confronting the truth did. Nothingness reflected back upon itself. The truth, that in itself there is nothing that is, but that only in connection and unity is there being, struck Mr. Stryker and the force he had unleashed. The unearthly darkness consumed itself, its power of nothingness vanishing in a swirling, shrinking cloud of sepulchral light as its own denial of being destroyed itself. With a horrified and horrifying scream from Stryker, the darkness contracted on him, and then vanished, leaving nothing behind except a room of stunned men and women wondering where Mr. Stryker had gone and how he could have left so suddenly.

Chapter Eleven: Home Again

Julian opened his eyes to see anxious faces looking into his. Tess, Ms. Sayer, Ryan, Hieu. He realized that he was in the infirmary, a small set of rooms on the first floor of the Admin building.

“You're all right!” said Ryan.

“*Are* you alright?” asked Ms. Sayer.

Julian considered this. He felt fine, just drained, deeply exhausted, like he had been hiking for miles up hill on a humid day. He sat up in the bed, flexing his leg muscles, scratching the back of his head, and stretching.

“Yeah. I'm OK.”

Seeing their looks of doubt, he continued, “Really, I'm fine, just really tired.”

“We haven't been sure what to make of what happened, Julian,” said Ms. Sayer.

Julian glanced at the others, and Ryan said, “It's OK, she knows.”

“Yes,” Ms. Sayer said with a rueful grin, “I know what danger and trouble my giving you that translation has led to.”

“But what happened? Where's Stryker? What did they do?”

“I met Ryan in the hallway. I was on my way to the meeting, hoping to sit in on the discussion,” said Ms. Sayer.

“Yeah, I was pretty freaked out. I got the clock going like you wanted, and I was on my way back to the board room, but I was scared sh-, uh, I was really scared, and when I saw Ms. Sayer, I told her the deal.”

“Ryan informed me that you were locked in a magical duel with Mr. Stryker, that the board itself was frozen, and that he thought you were losing. I wasn't sure what we could do, but we rushed in to the room, where we saw you collapse to the floor, a white aura around you dissipating as you did so. The members of the board seemed fine, and they were rushing to the back of the room, where Tess and Hieu were kneeling over you, trying to wake you up. Mr. Stryker was gone.”

“You wouldn't wake up, not for anything,” Tess joined in, her voice full of concern.

“So after Ms. Sayer explained it all to the board, we moved you here,” said Ryan.

“Since you were breathing fine, and the reasons for your collapse were, shall we say, a bit unusual, I figured it was best to move you here rather than call an ambulance. Though, I must confess, I have been very anxious for you,” said Ms. Sayer.

Julian thought for a while. “How long have I been here, then?”

“About three hours,” said Ryan. “It's seven now.”

Looking at Ms. Sayer, Julian asked, “What did you tell them? What happened? What did they see?”

“Well, I could hardly tell them that Mr. Stryker was destroyed in a magical duel with our fifteen-year-old student, Julian Drake. None of them remember any of the magic. They just remember you boys appearing, yelling about Mr. Stryker having a conflict of interest, then Stryker being gone and you collapsing at the back of the room. So I suggested that Stryker ran out of the room in the face of your protests and tried to shift the conversation to your claims.”

“I gave them the info we dug up on Stryker,” Hieu said. “They were all over it.”

“They wanted to know what in the world you were doing there,” said Ms. Sayer, “but the papers Hieu provided gave them the answer they needed. They agreed that it appeared that Stryker indeed had a conflict of interest and was trying to steer the board into a deal that would benefit him financially. His disappearance didn't hurt the case against him, either.”

“So they let us off the hook,” Ryan said.

“Well, Dr. Stephens wants to see you tomorrow, Julian, as do I,” said Ms. Sayer. “But I think that the board accepted Stryker's plot as explanation enough for why you were there. They basically see it as a case where they did not perform their own due diligence, and some students who cared about their school did it for them. They are willing to overlook the way you barged into the meeting.”

“They kinda had to overlook it, didn't they? They bloody well couldn't see us!” said Tess gleefully.

The other three laughed, and if Julian had any doubts about feeling better, they immediately vanished.

“Ryan,” Julian said.

“Yeah?”

“You saved the day, you know. Thank you.”

“What? Are you kidding? You're the hero, Julian.”

“I couldn't have finished. I was losing. Having the clock back is what made it possible for me to . . . to finish it.”

“Well, you're welcome. I just did what you told me to do.”

The look of admiration on Ryan's face made Julian uncomfortable, so he let it go. The others began to file out, and Julian found himself content to close his eyes again.

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The school nurse let Julian go a little later that evening, and after a belated dinner (Ms. Sayer took the four of them out to Crenshaw's, a local restaurant in Wilton, for their favorites, handmade burgers—though Tess insisted on a veggie burger—onion rings, and chocolate shakes). The next day was Saturday, and Julian had agreed to go see Ms. Sayer first thing. She had told him that Dr. Stephens wanted to see him at eleven, so they agreed that he could come by her office at ten.

He found her drinking tea in one of the armchairs, and at her invitation he poured himself a cup. He still wasn't used to the temperature, but it was soothing.

“Alright, Julian, tell me the story. I was happy to cover for you with the board, as obviously you have done the school a huge service. But I think I deserve to know what you have really been up to. Clearly you've made use of Dr. Drake's journal.”

“Yeah, I have. And I owe you an apology. I know I promised that I would come back to you before doing anything. I know that I should have.

Things just kind of moved really fast. But, I swear, we, I, only did it because we had no choice. I mean, we started out just trying to get information about what Stryker was up to. We used a camera and a computer, and, but, he stopped us with magic. We had no choice, then. I had to learn enough so that we could find out what was going on. And we did, we overheard him proposing the sale of Parker's Piece, explaining that one of his firms was buying it, and arguing that the school should be sold to a corporation. And he was controlling the committee with magic, just like he did the board."

"So you had no choice but to fight back."

"Well, once the committee approved the motion to go before the board, we knew we had to stop it somehow. So I learned how to make us invisible, and we just went. We didn't really have a plan, the rest just kind of happened. When I lost control of my feelings, we were visible, and then I tried to break his hold on the board, and he attacked me."

"What was that like?"

"It was horrible, scary. I was . . . he . . . it was like an abyss, darkness, nothingness, death, all at once. It was Tess, and Ryan getting the clock going, that saved me. They gave me enough support to protect myself. But . . ." Here Julian paused and swallowed.

Ms. Sayer realized that he was on the verge of tears. "Are you upset about what happened to Mr. Stryker?"

"Yes!" said Julian. "It was awful. He, the darkness, it just collapsed in on him, and he was gone. What really happened to him?"

"From what I remember of the journal, and other reading I have done, Julian, I am afraid that he is dead, consumed by the nothingness that he released."

"Then I killed him. I wasn't trying to hurt anyone! It just happened. With the clock's power, I formed a mirror to protect myself and the darkness that was reaching for me met that, and reflected back, and . . . and, he was gone."

"I know this won't make it any easier to bear, Julian, but you mustn't blame yourself. What Mr. Stryker did, he did himself, out of greed and the pursuit of power. Just as Dr. Drake said, those who use dark magic endanger their souls. In this case, his body as well. Evil is a corruption of goodness, and that corruption ultimately consumes itself."

“Yeah, I know. But that doesn't make it any easier to deal with. I couldn't sleep last night thinking about it. I guess the good side is I know I'll never be tempted to use dark magic. God, what a fate.”

“Are you going to continue with your use of magic, then?”

“Well, I guess I kinda have a gift for it. Tess and Ryan and Hieu act like it's impossible. I'm gonna keep exploring it. I mean, if Stryker was out there, there must be others. But I know,” Julian said, seeing the look on the chaplain's face, “I'll be careful.” He went on, “I do have some questions though: How come I can do this? How did Stryker learn about magic? And does Dr. Stephens know?”

Over her glasses, Ms. Sayer looked at Julian for while, and he was reminded of how she had weighed him up before telling him about what his great-grandfather's journal contained. Finally, she said, “Julian, you *do* have a gift. I don't know why you find magic relatively easy, but I assure you it is a gift, and a rare one. According to Dr. Drake's journal, anyone can do what you have done, but still, I think the ability to do it, or at least the will to pursue it and learn, is a rare gift. Perhaps it runs in families, though I have no direct evidence of that other than you and your great-grandfather. I also think that your gift has more to do with you than the clock. *It* is an artifact Dr. Drake made, and it certainly seems to have helped you in your battle. But your gift is inside you, and you don't need the clock or anything else. As I said, it is a rare gift, and you should use it carefully and wisely.”

“I will, I promise.” Seeing her look, he added, “I *really* mean it.”

She paused again to sip her tea. “This all reminds me of an old idea, and maybe talking about it will help you to see the seriousness of this.”

Julian looked at her questioningly.

“I know that nowadays we tend to use the word “Faerie” just for childrens' stories, and we tend to think of faeries as twee little Peter Pans. But the word is very old, and that dumbed down popular idea of it is certainly not the only way to think about it.”

By now Julian knew how Ms. Sayer was and so he restrained his questions, knowing that this was somehow relevant and that she would get to how in her own good time.

“The word is usually used to talk about a place, “faery land,” but at it's heart “faerie” denotes that which is “fay.” The word comes from the Latin *Fata*, the Fates. Mysterious, timeless, supernatural, powerful, and in

fact dangerous. The power that you have learned to use is of Faerie, Julian. It's Fay. It's dangerous. It is not evil, at least not if you appreciate what it is and are careful in how you use it. Dr. Drake seemed to have a deep understanding of that. But you musn't forget the danger. The whole business of self-transcendence, of going beyond subject-object duality, is about eternity, and eternity, by its very nature, is a threat to our inherent biological disposition as timebound, self-centered animals. It's not that the eternal is evil, quite the opposite, but it's powerful and dangerous if not respected. That's why Dr. Drake talks so much about motive. You have to be pure in motive and never try and use that power for anything else than good. I don't think you are alone in being able to use this power, but you may find yourself being lonely. Be careful, but, and I think this is important, don't be afraid to share your gift with those you trust. It is important for you to be connected to others; it will help you to retain the right perspective."

In awe, Julian said, "It makes me feel like I have a special task, like a responsibility. But it also makes me feel strange. 'Fay.' I had never heard that word. Thank you. It does make it strike home. I will be careful. And I do think I have some I can trust. You, Tess, Ryan, Hieu. I would like to teach others if I can, especially Tess. She was able to reach into my mind there at the very end and keep me balanced until Ryan got the clock going."

"I think that's fine. Just consider carefully who and what you teach. This is a lot for someone your age—heck, someone of any age—to take on. But this is what you have been given, your fate, if you will. So I will assume that you are ready for it. You certainly have shown yourself to be so far."

Ms. Sayer paused. "I know you are wondering about Mr. Stryker. I just don't know. There are other sources of knowledge about magic out there; he must have found one, but unfortunately for him, it was dark magic. From what little I know, dark magic is easier to access, because using it draws on greed, hatred, and envy, things this world is all too blessed with."

"Well, what he tried to do was bad, but what happened to him was worse. Horrible, awful. I ended up feeling sorry for him, and I think that was important."

"Yes, I am sure it was. Compassion is an overlooked and undervalued feeling in our world. We should all cultivate it wherever we can. But especially those who can draw on power." She smiled at Julian then, and he found himself feeling reassured.

“I know you know about this, and my friends do, but does Dr Stephens? Do I have to act differently around people?”

“I think you should just be yourself, and be careful about who you let know of your gifts. But remember that most people won't believe it unless they see it, and even seeing it, they will be happy to grasp at some other explanation. That's what the board did. Dr. Stephens, now, he is a shrewd man, and a wise one. I don't think he knows, but he may suspect. That you will soon know, and it's time you went to see him.”

Julian glanced at the clock and realized it was 10:45. he got to his feet. “OK, Ms. Sayer. Thanks for the tea. Thanks for everything.”

“Julian, you're welcome. I ask just one thing: that you come to see me regularly. I want to make sure that you process all of this in a healthy way, and, I have to admit, I'm curious to learn more about how you really did this.”

~

Dr. Stephens was smiling when Julian entered his office, to sit down in an armchair at his invitation. The Headmaster, who now seemed himself again, kind, wise, and scholarly, sat down in the other armchair. He smiled again, and said, “Julian, thank you for coming. I and the school and perhaps especially the board owe you a great deal. I think that my job and the future of this institution were saved by your actions.”

“It wasn't just me, sir. Ryan and Tess and Hieu were all involved.”

“Oh, I know. You were all deep in, I am sure. But somehow,” and here Dr. Stephens paused and look penetratingly at Julian, “I think that you were the impetus behind this. I think it had to do with Dr. Drake's clock.”

Not sure what to make of this, Julian tried to change the subject.

“What did the board decide to do, Dr. Stephens?”

“Well, it's all good news. We have confirmed the research that Hieu did and taken it a little further. Not only did Mr. Stryker own a company, cleverly disguised, that had a controlling interest in the firm that wanted to buy Parker's Piece, but he also had connections to an education corporation, the kind of firm that takes over schools and runs them for profit, typically firing most of the staff in the process. This is all information that we should have discovered ourselves, but thankfully you all did so for us. The

board has also issued a vote of confidence in my leadership, which was kind of them in the circumstances, and much appreciated. So, as I said, I owe you a lot.”

“Don't worry about it, sir. I was just, I've, I've found a connection here, and I didn't want that taken away.”

“Yes, I am very glad to see that. You also wanted to save the clock, didn't you? It's a remarkable device, very unusual.”

Julian looked into Dr. Stephens' eyes for a moment, and then said blandly, “Yes, sir. It belonged to my great-grandfather, of course, and it's connected to the school. I wanted to protect it, but even more I wanted to save the school.”

“So you are feeling better about this place, I take it?”

“Yes, sir. I've learned a lot in the last few months. Since my parents split up, I've been pretty withdrawn. But this year I think I've learned something about being at home. Before I didn't feel at home anywhere, not at my house, not at school. I had no place that I belonged. I guess that's what I needed, and I've found that here. I've also learned that I think having a place has to do with connections, with relationships . . . with people who care.”

Julian paused. “Yes. I think it's the connections that make a place, not the place itself. I mean, this place is special, and special to me, but it's special because of the relationships here. I know now that I have to create those relationships wherever I am, and if I do, then I'll be at home.”

“That's profound, Julian,” Dr. Stephens said. “If you have learned that this year, then you've learned much more than we can teach in our classrooms.” Dr. Stephens looked thoughtful for a minute. “I've learned something too,” he went on. “Do you remember when I told you I was curious about Dr. Drake's clock, about why he called it a guide to headmasters? Well, I know now what he meant. Change is inevitable, and much of it is good and needed, but it must be change for the right reason, and not simply for greater wealth or power. I have a trust to see this school into the future, and I think we will see change, but without destroying the past, or Parker's Piece! The clock seems somehow to discourage that kind of grasping for power, and that's a good reason to keep it here at the heart of our campus.”

“Mr. Stryker certainly wanted to get rid of it, sir. Do you know how he found out about it?”

Dr. Stephens looked down for a moment, and grinned sheepishly. “Well, I'm afraid that I showed it to him and even showed him the inscription on the bottom.”

Julian stared, amazed.

“I was giving the new governors a tour of the campus, not long after we put the clock back in the library. I'm rather proud of it, so I made a point of showing it to them and telling them the story.”

Julian thought to himself, 'So he must have realized what it was and that it was a threat to his plans . . . !'

Out loud, he said, “You can't blame yourself, sir. How could you have known?”

“Thank you, Julian, for that. Now is there anything else I can do?”

“Well, sir, just one question. What about Ms. Ackermann? I, uh, I think that she was working with Mr. Stryker. She published that editorial that was so critical of you, and I think, I think she is the one who stole the journal and the history of the school and the pieces from the clock. I know why Stryker wanted the clock out of commission, and I can see why he would want the journal, so no one would realize what the clock did. But why did she take the history and the deeds? What's going to happen to her?”

Dr. Stephens looked at Julian for a moment, as if appraising him. “I cannot say much to you about Ms. Ackermann, as it would be a violation of her privacy. However, I think I owe you some explanation. It turns out that the documents related to Parker's Piece showed that the Parker Family gave the land to the school in perpetuity, intending that it never be sold. There are no surviving members of the family, so no one would know unless they had the original documents. Those documents stood in the way of Mr. Stryker's plan. And, you are correct, Ms. Ackermann *was* involved in the thefts, as I have learned, and the school will be responding. Apparently the journal and the clock were very difficult to destroy for some reason, though the history seems to be gone forever. That's all I can tell you, and I ask that you keep this confidential.”

“OK. Thanks, Dr. Stephens. I really appreciate it.”

“You are welcome, Julian. Now, I am sure you want to enjoy the rest of your Saturday with your friends.”

~

The first thing Julian did after leaving Dr. Stephen's office was to find Tess. She responded to his text and agreed to meet him under the oak that stood at the top of the Hill. He sat with his back to the trunk, and watched her walk over from McGuire, her dark hair blowing freely in the wind. She's always a mess, he thought. And I don't care a bit.

"Alright, Julian?"

"Hey. I just thought, I, well, I wanted to say a few things to you, and tell you about my conversation with Ms. Sayer."

Flopping down in the grass, she said, "It's all been pretty crazy, hasn't it?"

"Yes, it has." Taking a breath, he said, "Tess, I want you to know that I heard—or felt—it when you reached out to me in the board room. That was really important: *All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.* I was teetering on the brink of the abyss, I think. I was about to lose it all, be engulfed."

"But wasn't it the clock that really helped you?"

"Yes, it did. Of course it did. But, those words from you, appearing in my mind . . . they helped me balance until the presence of the clock reached me. I wanted to thank you. I'm not sure I would be here without that."

"*We* wouldn't be here. But, OK. I'll accept your thanks if you'll take mine for including me in all this."

Julian raised an eyebrow at her.

"Stop it, you jerk," she said. "You know what I mean. This whole experience has been amazing. I am thrilled to be involved. Yes, it was terrifying, really scary there at the end. But, how could I miss that? I feel like I was in a *Dr. Who* episode or something." She grinned then. "And that's a good thing."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am sure."

"Well, there's something else. I think, maybe, I think you have the same ability, or I mean, I think you could learn. If you wanted to."

"What? Me? Really?"

"Did you actually say those words from Julian of Norwich?"

"No . . . I thought them."

“That’s what I thought. I wasn’t capable of hearing just then anyway, not with my ears. But I heard them in my mind.”

“Really? Wow.”

“That’s why I think you could learn this. Ms. Sayer and I talked more about the magic. She thinks that anyone can learn it, but that some people have an easier time of it. She thinks the clock is a help, but that it’s not necessary. She thinks some people have the knack for it, I guess.” Julian recounted the conversation and then said, “So it worries me some. It’s dangerous I guess, but I want to share it with you, if you’d like. I don’t want to be alone in this.”

“Julian, there’s nothing I’d like more. I would love that. Seriously. And I’m flattered. When do we get started?”

~

The school year still had a few weeks to go, and Julian found himself looking forward to quietly enjoying them. He had some good friends now. He was learning a lot. He actually liked it at St. E's. He didn't relish the thought of returning home to his parents and their new lives, and he didn't want to say goodbye to Ryan or Hieu, or Ms. Sayer, or to Tess. While he might see Ryan over the summer, Tess was going back home to Scotland. He knew he would miss her. As those last weeks flew by—there were, after all, exams to get ready for--they found a little time to start a few basic lessons. But as Julian expected, in what time they had she picked it up quite naturally.

The four of them found themselves together the last night of the year, the Friday evening before the 9:00 am graduation ceremony on Saturday. By tradition, to honor the seniors, all underclass students stayed on campus and attended the ceremony before departing for home. The night before, all exams concluded and nothing left to do but pack, there was a celebration in the main quad. Teachers has strung lights in the branches of the huge old oak tree, and students milled about in groups. They listened to the music of a DJ or partook in a snow cone from one of the vendors the school had brought to campus or—the highlight of the evening—took turns throwing balls at the paddle trigger of a dunk tank. The first one in the tank was Dr. Stephens, followed by various teachers. By this point in the evening, some of the thrill of dunking teachers had worn off, replaced by the thrill of getting to be dunked. Ryan, Hieu, Tess, and Julian watched their fellow students jostle

each other for a turn either to sit in the tank or to throw, each party taunting the other.

The line wound down, and suddenly Tess grabbed Julian's arm, calling to Ryan to grab the other.

His sputtered protests, "Hey! No! What are you doing?!" were to no avail as he found himself next to climb into the tank, and he stopped struggling and resigned himself to climbing in after handing his cell phone over to Tess for safe keeping. Privately, it felt good to have friends, even friends who wanted to see him soaked. He also grinned inwardly, as he realized soaking was not necessarily the outcome. Climbing into the tank and perching himself on the rough wooden slat that served as a seat, Julian grinned at his friends and then closed his eyes, willing himself to be calm.

"Hold your nose, Julian!" Hieu called, as Ryan wound up and threw one of the balls hard at the paddle. Because it was Ryan, the ball connected solidly on the first try, and the wooden seat collapsed, pitching Julian into the water below. He floundered around for a minute and climbed out the opposite side of the tank, and then down the ladder. His friends good-natured jeers turned to grins and protests as they saw that Julian was completely dry.

"Oy! Not fair! That's a trivial use of magic if I ever saw one!" said Tess. Ryan and Hieu shushed her, as they all looked around. Fortunately, they saw, as Julian had, that they were the last to be interested, so no one had seen Julian's performance. Julian sighed, looking around the quad at the scattered groups of students and teachers and at the moon shining above the huge oak. "Sorry, guys. I just couldn't resist." He paused, then went on to say, "I'm really going to miss you all this summer."

Ryan looked at Tess, then at Hieu, before responding. "Yeah, we don't blame ya. And we're gonna miss you so much that next year we'll learn enough from you to make sure you get wet."

Julian looked at his friends and found that somehow he didn't mind the prospect at all.

The End